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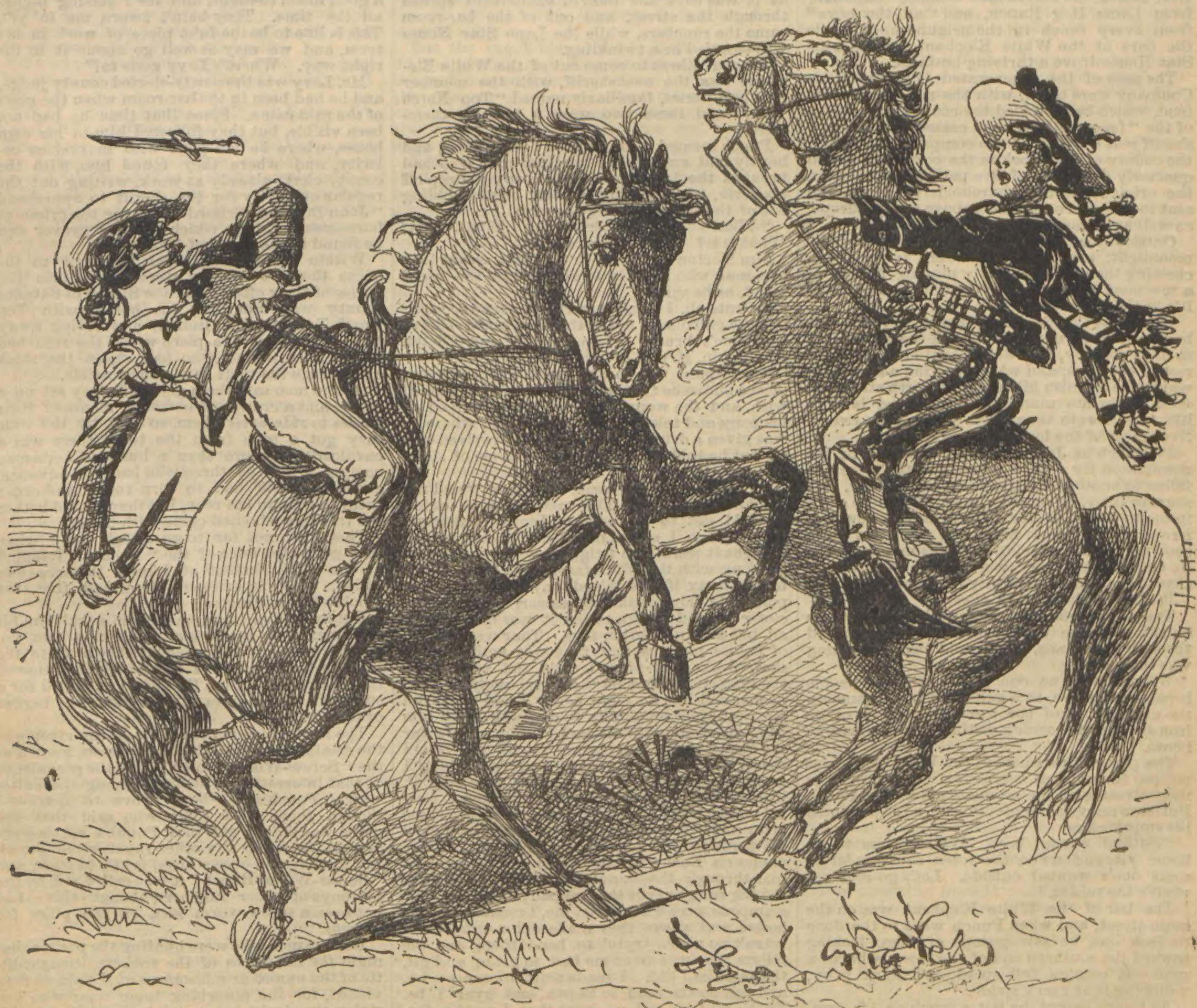
No. 310

THE MARSHAL OF SATANSTOWN: Or, THE LEAGUE OF THE CATTLE-LIFTERS.

A SEQUEL TO "OLD CROSS-EYE," AND "TOP NOTCH TOM."

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER,

AUTHOR OF "NEMO, KING OF THE TRAMPS," "RED RUDIGER," "THE RUSSIAN SPY," "THE RED RAJAH," "THE IRISH CAPTAIN," "THE MAN IN RED," "DEATH'S HEAD CUIRASSIERS," "PHANTOM KNIGHTS," ETC., ETC.



THE MARSHAL HAD NOT TIME TO PARRY, AND HAD TO LEAP HALF OUT OF HIS SADDLE TO EVADE THE FLYING WEAPON.

The Marshal of Satanstown;

OR,

The League of the Cattle-Lifters.

A Sequel to "Old Cross-Eye" and
"Top Notch Tom."

BY CAPT. FRED'K WHITTAKER,
AUTHOR OF "ONE-EYE, THE CANNONEER," "THE
FLYING DUTCHMAN OF 1880," "THE PHAN-
TOM KNIGHTS," "THE SAUCY JANE,
PRIVATEER," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ELECTION NIGHT.

ELECTION night is apt to be lively at any time and place in the Union; but when the man who wins the race is a universal favorite, and the place is Texas, the result in consumption of whisky and talk, is apt to be something not conceived of in the placid North, where people drink beer and fire off crackers only on extreme occasions.

Satanta county, Texas, never a very sleepy place, had just elected a sheriff, in the person of Mr. Henry Kimble, Marshal of Satanstown, better known as "Hank, the Nailer," from his dexterity in driving nails with pistol-bullets; so the county seat was all ablaze with lights in the windows, full of the reports of fire-arms and pyrotechnics, in honor of the occasion.

All the ranchers of the county had come into Satanstown to vote; and after the count had been announced, showing the candidate elected without opposition, they remained to drink his health, and have a little enjoyment of the kind that their spirits craved most, in which the spirit of rye figured, more than any other single element.

They were there, from all parts of the country—ranchers and citizens, cowboys and bosses. Old Judge Collingsworth, white-haired and jolly, with his sons-in-law, the newly-elected sheriff and "Top Notch" Tom Field, Member of Assembly for the district. "Punch" Burleson was there, with "Limpy" Balstrap and Deaf Smith, the handsome "Colonel" Callahan, from Lame Hog Ranch, and "all the boys" from every ranch in the neighborhood, while the bars at the White Elephant and the Lone Star House drove a thriving business.

The men of the regenerated Glasgow Cattle Company were there, with the rest, for the old feud, which had divided the county in the days of the "fence-cutters," had ceased, and the new sheriff was overseer of the company, while half the county owned stock in the corporation, and quarterly dividends of five per cent made even the original Scotch shareholders happy, and sent the price of certificates above par in Europe, as well as Texas.

Outside the town, the prairie slept in the moonlight, and the cattle were lying down, chewing the cud; the slowly moving figures of a few men, left on guard, the only evidences of life in the landscape.

Even Jose Concha, ex-justice of the peace who had been an earnest opponent of the new sheriff in days gone by, had wheeled into line with the rest of the boys, and was delivering a speech, in which the Spanish idioms of his birth struggled with the white man's slang, acquired later in life, to celebrate the praises of the new executive officer of the laws of the county.

Inasmuch as Jose had been defeated, in the nomination for county judge, and the prize had fallen to another man, in the person of Mr. Belshazzar Levy, the speech was all the more creditable to the "Greaser Jedge," as the cowboys irreverently called him, and the boys were showing their appreciation of his magnanimity by cheering his every word, when an interruption to the general festivity occurred.

It came in the form of silence.

The yelling and firing of pistols ceased in the outskirts of the town, and a low buzz spread through the streets, which told that something was the matter.

What it was, no one knew; but the people became attentive, as a galloping horse came up the main street of the town, the clatter of its iron-shod hoofs echoing distinctly from house to house.

The party of ranchers at the White Elephant noticed the unusual silence, all the more, from its contrast with the previous noise, and Punch Burleson remarked sententiously, as he put down his empty glass:

"Suthin' wrong, boys. 'Tain't time to go home yit, and when the town shuts up 'arly, some one's wanted outside. Let's go and see what's the racket."

The bar of the White Elephant was on the main street, and when Punch went to the door to look out, he saw groups of men, looking toward the southern end of the town, whence a man was coming, full speed, on a dark pony, whipping it at every stride.

As Punch looked, he felt a touch on his arm, and the figure of an Indian stood beside him, in

all the bravery of feathers and scarlet leggings, with a bright green hunting-shirt, open at the breast, revealing silver medals on the bronzed skin beneath.

The Indian was a well-known man in Satanstown, being a faithful friend to the renowned Top Notch Tom, chief of the Kiowas, once the wildest of plains Indians, now subsided into peaceful citizens of the Indian Territory.

The Indian's name was Wild Cat, and Punch said:

"What's the matter, Wild Cat?"

Wild Cat pointed to the fast-approaching horseman, and said, in his deep, musical voice:

"Horse come fast. Bad news."

"Bad news!" echoed Punch. "Why, what bad news should there be now? Everything's lovely, isn't it?"

The Indian shook his head, with the quiet reply:

"You see."

Then the horseman dashed up in front of the bar-room, and as he pulled his pony on its haunches, he called out hoarsely:

"Where's Punch Burleson, and Limpy Balstrap?"

Punch hurried forward at once, while the cry for Limpy Balstrap was passed inside the bar, with great speed.

"Who is it? That you, Jim Norton?" cried the rancher, as he recognized one of his own men left in charge of the ranch. "What's up?"

Jim Norton made his reply in a hoarse whisper, as if he was hardly able to speak, as he replied:

"It warn't my fault, boss. I did what I could, but they was too many fur me. The darned galoots has swep' Limpy's Ranch of the ponies and druv off most of your stock in the muss. Tom Briggs is wiped out, and so's Charley Kane, and they give me this to remember 'em by."

And the poor fellow held his left arm with his right hand, while a dark stream of drops showed that he had been hit severely, though his pluck had enabled him to ride the five miles from Punch's Ranch to the town at full speed, to tell the news.

There had been a dead silence as the wounded cowboy told his story, for every one wanted to know what had happened, but as soon as it was over the buzz of excitement spread through the street, and out of the bar-room came the ranchers, while the Lone Star House was emptied in a twinkling.

Among others to come out of the White Elephant was the new sheriff, with the member for the district, familiarly named "Top Notch Tom;" and these two were a host in themselves.

Punch seemed to be stunned by the news, and hardly had sense to see that the man who had brought the intelligence was ready to drop off his horse, when Limpy Balstrap came hobbling out of the saloon, asking eagerly:

"What's the matter, boys? What is it? What is it? Anything wrong?"

Jim Norton smiled, with the faint, weary look of a man who is ready to swoon with the loss of blood, as he said:

"Gents all, I don't want to weaken too soon; but the galoots hit me in the arm, and I b'lieve the bone's bruck. Help me off, and I'll tell what I kin, if ye'll give me some whisky."

The request was so consonant with the tastes of the audience that it was instantly complied with, and the wounded cowboy was helped off his pony and taken into the bar-room, where he was given a drink of whisky, which revived him so that he told his story, amid a circle of silent and attentive men.

"I was a-ridin' my beat," he began, "and not thinkin' of trouble. The cattle was all quiet, and I'd got to the edge of Limpy Balstrap's range, when I seen a man ridin' to'rds me. I thought it were Tom Briggs, fur it were his sorrel pony with the white face, and I hollered out to him to ax if he'd h'ard anything from the polls. He didn't make no answer, and as he got closer to me I began to see it war'n't Tom at all, but a man in Injun togs. Thar were a hard of ponies nigh us, and they was actin' kinder skeered-like, but afore I c'u'd tell what were the matter, the cuss on the sorrel pony he fires at me, and hits me right here. I had my pistol out, jest afore he give it to me, and I let him have it. I dunno whether I hit him or not, fur the sound of the shot brung 'em all up, 'round there, like bees in a swarm, and fu'st thing I knowed, zippety-zip, the bullets was a-flyin', like 'skeeters in the spring-time. I seen it war'n't no place fur me, so I lit aout, and they come arter me, hell-bent to wipe me aout, afore I c'u'd git through. Then come a stampede of all the ponies on Bucker's Ranch, and they druv' past me, through the Screw-worm, and aout over the big range to'rds the company's haouse. The stampede were what saved me, I reckon; fur the hosses and steers they made sich a muss there warn't no use in tryin' to head them, and the fellers that was arter me had to git up and git, the same as I did. I made shift to scrape by, and git on the road to town, and hyar I be. That's all I kin tell ye, 'cept that I want a doctor, the wu'st way."

Here Top Notch Tom, who had been listening to him intently, came forward and said kindly:

"I'll take care of you, Jim. I don't think the bone's broken, or you could not have done what you have. Here, boys, rip the sleeve of his shirt up gently, and I'll dress the wound."

A dozen willing knives were ready at once, and the bloody shirt sleeve was cut off in a twinkling, when the full extent of the damage was made manifest.

A ragged hole in the upper part of the arm, from whence the dark stream of blood was dripping, showed where the bullet had struck, and the first care of the young rancher-surgeon—for Top Notch Tom had been bred a doctor—was directed to stopping the flow of blood, which he did by his thumb *below* the wound.

As soon as he saw the effect of the pressure, he turned to the wounded man with a cheering smile, to say:

"It's all right, Jim. The artery is not cut, and the bone was only scraped. You'll get well."

Then he told one of the cowboys to go to his saddle-bags, and bring a case of instruments, that he always carried there. As soon as they arrived, he probed for the extent of the injury, and found that the bullet had gone through the thickness of the biceps muscle, by a mere chance escaping the artery, and grazing the bone as it passed.

Before long he had made the man comfortable and Jim Norton, under the cheering news that the bone was not broken, revived wonderfully, and was put to bed at the White Elephant, when Top Notch Tom and the new sheriff went out into the street, together, and found the town seething with excitement at the news that had just come in.

Tom saw the Indian waiting patiently outside the bar-room, and beckoned to him.

"Come, Wild Cat," he said, in the Kiowa language, "let us go on the trail, while it is hot."

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW SHERIFF.

THE Indian chief stepped forward to obey the request of his friend, when Hank the Nailer, the newly-elected sheriff, interposed.

"Look here, Tom," he said, quietly, "there's a good moon to-night, and she's getting higher all the time. They hain't sworn me in yet. This is like to be the fu'st piece of work in my term, and we may as well go about it in the right way. Where's Levy gone to?"

Mr. Levy was the newly-elected county judge, and he had been in the bar-room when the news of the raid came. Since that time he had not been visible, but they followed him to his own house, where he had gone with marvelous celerity, and where they found him, with the county clerk, already at work, writing out the regular authority for the sheriff to apprehend "John Doe and Richard Roe" for the crime of horse-stealing, than which nothing graver can be found in the State of Texas.

Within ten minutes after they got to the house the new officers were sworn into the duties of their offices, and the Sheriff of Satanta county was mounting his horse, with Top Notch Tom and the Indian, and riding away from the town to the place where the raid had taken effect, to find who had stolen the stock and avenge the theft as soon as possible.

As the men saw them going off they set up a cheer, and a crowd of cowboys mounted their ponies to ride after them, so that by the time they got a mile from the town there was a cavalcade of more than a hundred horsemen coming after the three who had the advance, and the sheriff had to turn round and order them to keep in the rear, lest they should bother the trackers who had come with them.

They had not far to go, at full speed, when they got to the edge of the "Bucker's Ranch," as the establishment of Limpy Balstrap was called, where they were informed that the trouble had originated.

Limpy was so nicknamed from a halt in his gait, caused by the kick of a bucking broncho, in time past, and his ranch was the next to the town in the long line of ranges which followed the course of the Blue Fork, and extended for a space of twenty miles or more along the border of the river.

The next above it in the line of the river was the establishment of Punch Burleson, known as the "Screw-Worm Ranch," from the prevalence of that interesting articulate, among the cattle which Punch's cowboys drove to market—though there were those who said that the name was a libel, and that Punch's cattle were as well treated as any other rancher's in Texas. But a nickname once started is apt to stick, and "Screw-Worm Ranch" it was called still by the cowboys of other ranchers, though there had not been a screw-worm seen on the place for months.

But the men who were hunting the prairie that night for the traces of the robbers, thought little of the names or misnomers of the places they visited, for the absorbing topic was: who had stolen the stock? how much had gone? and, if it had gone, where was it?

The first symptom of trouble was found when they came to the edge of the Bucker's Ranch.

It was swept bare as the desert, and not a head of stock could be seen there. Limpy had been breeding bronchos and cross-grades for the market for years, and had accumulated a herd of several thousand ponies and horses, of the kind that the Southwest can challenge the world with, as reliable animals for work of all kinds.

The herd had been worth many thousand dollars, and the total disappearance of the animals bid fair to reduce Limpy to beggary, for the land he owned was hardly worth two dollars an acre.

The lame rancher was therefore very silent and pale, as he surveyed the empty pastures, that he had left full of prancing steeds, neighing to each other, and he watched the Indian tracker with feverish eagerness, as Wild Cat rode at a slow canter, eying the ground in the bright moonlight as he went, till he suddenly pulled up his pony with a grunt, and pointed to a dark spot on the prairie ahead.

"Ugh! Dead man!" said Wild Cat. "Keep back! Must see. White man no good trail. Keep back."

They obeyed him, and the active Indian leaped off his horse and began to run forward, step by step, searching the ground as he went, never lifting his eyes save to run along the line of faint marks, on which he relied to find out his desire.

Top Notch Tom took the pony the Indian had left and waited, though he was as eager as anybody there. When a cowboy tried to go forward, he sternly checked him with the question:

"Do you think you can beat Wild Cat at a trail?"

The man stopped his pony, and the Indian pursued his way in peace, groping as if in the dark, frequently stooping to the earth to examine the marks, and then creeping along, till he reached the dark spot on the prairie.

They saw him stoop down and examine this spot very closely, after which he rose and went all round it, as if searching for more tracks.

At last they saw him coming back for about fifty feet, when he beckoned to them to advance and the cavalcade rode up to him.

When they were within a few yards the Indian signed them to stop, and called out in his own tongue to Tom Field, who said:

"He wants Hank and myself, with the man who owns the ground. That is Balstop, I think."

"Yes," replied Limpy, sadly. "Reckon it's about all I own now, boys."

The three men rode up to Wild Cat, and a very animated conversation ensued between him and Top Notch Tom, who presently said:

"The chief tells me that the man shot here was killed from behind by some one on foot with a Winchester rifle, and that the assassin hid in the mesquite bush over yonder. He says that the robbers, whoever they are, are not Indians but white men, with shod horses. He thinks the trail will be found to go to the Indian Territory, and that the thieves will try to sell the ponies there. It is clear there were a number of men in this robbery, and that they are desperate fellows. He recommends that we be ready for a long chase and a powerful enemy."

The words produced a silence among the cowboys, which was broken by Hank, the Nailer, who remarked:

"That's certain, boys. Haow many men does he think are in the party?"

Tom turned to the chief; but the Indian, who understood a great deal more English than he generally admitted, spoke to him earnestly.

"He says," translated Tom, "that there are at least twenty in the party, and that they are well armed, or they would not have dared to make such a dash as they have. If they get to the Territory before we do, they are likely to fight, and we must be ready to fight, too."

"That's the talk," replied Limpy, gravely. "I've got four boys left, besides myself, and I'm ready to go; but haow is it about the rest of ye? I ain't the man to ax my neighbors to take me up when I'm the only loser."

"Ye ain't no sich thing," broke in Punch Burleson. "If I ain't much mistook, Jim said as how they'd stole some of my steers. I'm jest as ready to go as any other gentleman."

"And so am I," said another and another of the cowboys, till at least twenty responses had been made.

Hank, the Nailer, listened to them, with a face that showed no symptom of the satisfaction he really felt, and then observed:

"Then the best thing you gentlemen kin do, is to go home, and take the best pony ye've got, and meet me, hyar, to-morrow morning. Tom and me, we kin foller the trail better than a hull grist of men, and we'll have suthin' to tell ye, in the morning. Them as wants to, come hyar at sunrise, with as much grub as they kin put on the saddles, so we mayn't hev to wait. Is that a bargain?"

"Ay, ay," was the response of more than one, and then the riders dispersed to their respective

ranches, leaving the track open for the Indian to pursue his search, accompanied by Limpy and Punch, who refused to leave him.

Then Wild Cat, followed at a little distance by the group of horsemen, went, slowly at first, but afterward with greater rapidity, along the trail, which was so plain in the bright moonlight, that even the white men could see it.

There were a number of horse-tracks, all going in the same direction, and the impressions showed that they had been going at desperate speed, tramping hard.

The trail was as plain as a road, and they saw it so plainly that Wild Cat jumped on his pony and followed it at a canter, for nearly a mile, till it took a turn and a new direction, when both Tom Field and Hank Kimble uttered a simultaneous exclamation, under their breath, for they saw it led in the direction of the Collingsworth Ranch, and the old judge, who had lagged behind them in the town, now came riding up, crying excitedly:

"Faster! faster! My God, boys! they've gone to the ranch, and the girls are there."

The Indian waved his hand as the excited old man was pressing in front of him, and called out in his own language to Tom:

"Keep him back! He will mix the trail, and we shall lose it."

Tom Field caught the judge's bridle and forced him to stop, while the old man kept repeating:

"The girls! the girls! My God, men, they may be in danger!"

The Indian heard him, and said to Tom:

"Tell him the horses stampeded that way, and that there is no danger. The trail will turn."

But it showed no symptoms of turning, for it ran on, straight as an arrow, for another two or three miles, when the tall roof of a quaint structure of logs came in sight in the moonlight, and Hank, the Nailer, gave a sigh of thankfulness, as he ejaculated:

"Thank God, they haven't burned it down!"

The many deeds of violence and the fires that had marked that border, not many years before, made him dread to see the ashes of his home, for it was the ranch-house of the cattle company that was before them, and the Sheriff of Satanata was overseer and manager, living in the house with his wife, the oldest daughter of the old judge, with a young baby, not five months old yet.

But the ranch-house stood, silent and dark, on the prairie, and they wondered what had taken the stampede of ponies that way, when the glimmer of a lamp, at one of the windows, as they turned a corner and saw another side of the house, told them that some one was still awake there.

Then, as they rode up to the door, they saw that the broad trail divided in front of the house, and ran past it, while the bodies of several dead horses, lying at the base of the mansion, showed the extreme terror of the herd, which had dashed blindly up against the foot of the foundations.

As they came round the corner, they halted, and the sheriff shouted out to the people in the house, when a white figure appeared at the end of the rustic piazza, with a lamp in its hand, and a woman's voice asked:

"Is that you, Harry?"

The sheriff rode close up to the piazza, for he recognized his wife in a long white wrapper, and he asked her:

"Is anybody hurt here, Helen? What has happened? What have you seen?"

The lady—she was very handsome, by the way—tossed her head, as she answered:

"Happened? What should have happened? There has been a stampede of the ponies, while you men were all electioneering, and you will have a fine time catching them. I saw them going by like a whirlwind, and the shocks shook the house when they tumbled up against it."

"Which way did they go?" asked the sheriff, without exhibiting any agitation.

"Toward Di's house," was the reply.

CHAPTER III. THE HAWK'S SWOOP.

WHEN Helen Kimble made the reply she did, Top Notch Tom started visibly in his saddle.

Di, or Diana, was his wife, Helen's sister, and he and she both lived at the Collingsworth Ranch, with the old judge.

It seemed too good to hope that men who had made such an audacious raid on the stock of the county, coupled with murder, should pass two houses, and still do no harm to the inmates.

The company's log-house was difficult to attack, having been built something like a fortification, and that might account for its immunity from the raid; but the Collingsworth ranch-house was an open place, with a broad veranda round it, and no protection of any kind; while a number of young lady friends were at the house, with its young mistress, enjoying the free life of the Southwest, out at all hours, riding on the ponies, and making parties with the rancher bachelors of the neighborhood.

No sooner had Helen given the answer, than the young member of Assembly beckoned to

Wild Cat, and set off, at break-neck speed, on the broad trail of the ponies, in the moonlight toward the Collingsworth Ranch, his heart full of fear for the safety of the women.

Punch Burleson and Limpy followed, for both were just as much interested as Tom, though in different ways. The inflammable hearts of the wild Texans had been set on fire, long ago, by the charms of some of the visitors from the North, that had been staying at the Collingsworth place, and not a rancher had escaped.

Away they went after Tom, at full speed, and soon the groves that surrounded the Collingsworth Ranch came in sight, and they saw that all was quiet and peaceful there.

The explanation was easily made, when they saw that the broad trail of the stampede had turned to the north, when it approached the edge of the timber that shielded that part of the Collingsworth Ranch, and went off toward the far distant plains that divided Satanata county from the Indian Territory, on the borders of which it lay.

Top Notch Tom uttered a sigh of relief when he saw this, and said to Limpy, who was following him:

"Thank God! they have gone the other way. I was afraid the luck was too good to be true."

Limpy nodded rather sadly, for his mind was running on his losses, and the idea of meeting the young lady who had captured his affections, in the light of a beggar, was not calculated to raise his spirits.

But he said nothing, for he was watching the Indian, who was still riding ahead of the party, his eyes fixed on the ground.

They had left the big trail, and still Wild Cat kept on, as if he was tracking something.

Suddenly he halted, and made a sign for the rest to stop, while he sprang off his horse and began to run on, in the way he had done when he first began tracking.

He went toward the house, and they saw him trailing, all the way.

Then, as they followed him slowly, they noticed the track of wheels in the soft soil, and the Indian was following these marks with an air of intense attention.

The trail led them on and on, toward the house; and, as they got near it, Tom's anxiety overcame his discretion, and he was riding forward, past the Indian, when Wild Cat seized his bridle, and cried out angrily, in the Indian tongue:

"Is the Looking-Glass Fighter* a boy, that he goes before the trailer to hide the sign? Go back and leave me to do my work. Wild Cat is not a child, that he should not know how to go on the war-path."

Even the anxiety of the husband and father wavered before the stern rebuke of the old warrior, and Tom halted, while the Indian rapidly continued:

"The wagon has come from the house, and it is the red one. They drove it fast, and the horses were whipped all the way. They had ropes to help them, and they have gone to follow the stampede. Let me alone, for I know what is coming. It is the red wagon."

He spoke as positively as if he had seen it, and, when he spoke of the red wagon, Tom knew well what he meant.

There was a large, four-horse wagon at the ranch, built for the prairie roads, with very strong wheels and roomy body, which the young rancher had bought for his wife and her friends, to go abroad and see the sights at the round-up times, when they were branding the cattle.

If this was the wagon that had gone—and the positive assurance of the Indian satisfied Tom that he knew what he was talking about—it would hold a dozen people, and the remaining question to be solved was the nature of the freight it had carried on its race.

The problem did not promise to puzzle any one very long, for already the trailer was approaching the house, and the eyes of the men who followed him were directed thither, in the hope of seeing some indication of life.

Lights were fitting about the mansion, as they came nearer, and the Indian went rapidly on, the trail growing plainer to his practiced eyes, all the time, till he paused in front of the house, and said to Tom, who was close behind him:

"Here they started. See the foot-steps. They took the people on the wagon here. They are the feet of men; but they carried something heavy. We shall see, when we go to the house." Tell the men who follow to keep back, and not ride on the trail. Do you go and find what has happened, for it will save time, and the warrior who can find, by using his tongue, is better than he who trails when the foe is in sight. Go."

Tom turned to the rest and told them to keep back, all but the judge, while he rode to the house.

The sound of his horse's feet brought out a

* For the explanation of the sobriquet applied to Tom by Wild Cat of the "Looking-Glass Fighter" see "Top Notch Tom." It arose from a skillful use by Field of the difficult shooting-trick, in which a mirror is employed and the marksman turns his back on the object.

light, in the hands of an old negro woman, who burst out at once:

"Oh, de Lawd! Marse Tom! de debbil bruck loose for shuah, and run away wid missy Di and all de chillern. Oh de Lawd, marse, de good Lawd keep us! Dey is all gone! all gone! ebbery one! and de pore little chillern too. Oh de Lawd! de Lawd!"

And old Aunt Chloe rocked herself to and fro; in the impulsive way of her race, wailing and crying, till Tom, who had turned ghastly pale, interrupted her with the stern order:

"Stop your noise! Do you hear, Chloe? Stop your noise, and tell me what has happened. What do you mean? Is there any one at the house, has any sense left? What has happened?"

But old Chloe was too much frightened to do anything but moan and wail:

"Oh, de Lawd, de Lawd! Marse Tom. Dey is all gone: gone off in de red wagon, wid de debbil and all his nigger. Oh, de Lawd! de Lawd!"

Tom bit his lips. Had he been a man of less coolness, he would have jumped off his horse and shaken the old woman, thereby frightening her out of what senses she had left; but he knew her character too well for that, and saw that she had hardly full possession of her wits, from extreme fright.

So he said to her, in a soothing way:

"Listen, Chloe. It was not your fault but we will follow and bring back your mistress and the children, if you can tell me exactly what has happened. Now, mind I want you to be quiet, and keep cool, if you ever want to see your mistress again. Can you be quiet?"

The calm, kind tone, had its effect on Chloe, who hastily dried her eyes on the skirt of her cotton dress, and stammered:

"I see try, Marse Tom. But I see so skeered! Dey was debbils, sah, *shuah*. Dey come all round de haouse, like debbils, wid deir red blankets a-wavin'. And some was like Injuns, and some like common, no count nigs; but dey all had deir guns and deir pistols, and dey skirmished, and dey skirmished-oh, how! how dey did skirmish! I t'ought de day of de Lawd war come, *shuah*, sah!"

"When was this?" asked Tom quietly, interjecting the question to make the old negress think, and forget her terror in the operation.

Old Chloe considered, and put her head on one side, like a cat watching a mouse.

"Lemme see, sah. De chillern was bein' put to bed, when we heard de fust noise."

"What noise, Chloe?"

"De big noise, sah. Says I to Aunt Chris, says I, 'Dat's t'under, *shuah*, Chris, and de rain's a-comin'.' And says she to me, says she, 'No it ain't, you fool niggah'—dem war de berry words she used, Marse Tom, and she a heap bracker dan I is, you know dat, youself, Marse Tom—don't ye now?"

"Ever so much blacker, Chloe. But go on. What did the noise turn out to be," said Tom, keeping his patience with a great effort, for he knew that if he bothered the poor creature, in her effort to remember distinctly the terrible episode of the night, he might end in frightening all the wits out of her.

Chloe hesitated, for she was exceedingly conscientious, and the question aroused all her effort to answer it correctly.

"I don't rightly know, Marse Tom," she said. "Fust I t'ought it war t'under, and then again it warn't t'under at all, but mo' like a stampede of de stock. And it goed by de house, off out dar, Marse Tom, by de Screw-Worm Ranch, and den it all git still, to onst, when de chillern war a-sayin' dar little prayer, like de little angels dey war, sah."

Here she broke down in a bitter wail, and Tom, whose heart was wrung with the anguish of a father who knows his children have been stolen, burst out with a fierce oath:

"Woman, do you want to send me mad? Tell me at once what has happened. For God's sake, Chloe, try to tell me the whole."

And the anguish in the man's voice was so great that it touched the right chord in old Chloe's heart. Like all her race, she was very sympathetic, and the appeal calmed her, when a threat would only have frightened her more.

"Yes, Marse Tom, yes, I tell ye all," she ejaculated, trying to collect her scattered senses. "It war when dey war sayin' dar prayers, dat we heard de hosses comin', lickety-split, up de av'noo, to de haouse, and little missy Di she jump up and begin to holler '*Dat's papa! dat's papa!*' And den dey all run to de windy, and I go wid dem, fur I t'ought, *shuah*, 'twar you, marse, when I seen dem debbils, and t'ought dem war Injuns at fust; fur dey yowl and dey holler, jest like de Injuns used ter do, marse. And de ladies war all on de piazzy, sah, and dey begin to holler, and de nex' t'ing we know, de debbils war off de hosses, and dey come inter de haouse, and I ketch up de chillern and run to hide dem in de loff, when missis come t'arin' up de stair, hollerin' like mad: '*My chillern! my chillern!*' and arter her come de rest of de ladies, screechin' to wake de dead, sah, and de debbils arter dem, yowlin' like wolves; and den, marse, den, I sw'ar I can't remembah what happen. All I know is dat

when I come to, de ladies war gone, and de debbils, and de chillern, and Chris wid dem, and pore ole Chloe leff all alone in de haouse. Oh, Marse Tom, Marse Tom, what am we to do now! Dey is taken de red waggin and de hosses, and gone off to kill 'em all."

Tom had listened attentively, and the old judge beside him had not uttered a word all the time, but now the old man, who was accustomed to negro character, asked:

"Did you see them take the red wagon, Chloe?"

"No, marse; but I went out to de barn arter dey war all gone, and dey done took de wagon and de hosses, and de harness, and clean aout de stable, of all de good stock, and leave not'ing behind."

"Was there no man around at the time?" asked Tom. "None of the cowboys?"

"No, marse. I don't done see nobody. If dey war dar, dey war wid de debbils."

"How were the devils, as you call them, dressed?" asked Tom quietly.

"Dem war all togged up like Injuns, marse, but dem warn't no Injuns. I'll sw'ar to dat."

"How do you know? What makes you say that?"

"Didn't I hyar 'em talkin', marse, and dey talk jest de same as all de rest of de boys, all but de head debbil hisself."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Tom, with a slight start, for he felt that a clew might be hidden in the apparently careless words of the old woman.

Old Chloe tossed her head, as if the question was a reflection on her sharpness.

"Didn't I hear him, Marse Tom? Dat man warn't no Texin. He done say *cahn't* and *shahn't*, 'stead of de way aour boys talk, sah. Dat man war one of dem cussed Britisher, dat war at de Comp'ny Ranch, afore Marse Hank done drove 'em off. Dat so, Marse Tom, I'll sw'ar to dat."

She seemed to be so positive as to this, that Tom was impressed, against all his experience, with her words, and said to the judge:

"The head of the villains was an Englishman, with a strong accent. Do you remember Berkeley, the man that used to be with the company?"

The old judge shuddered.

"Remember him! I should say I had cause to do it, and you, too. It may be the same; but I heard that he had gone back to England when the company gave up the fight. It is not possible that he can have dared to come back, after the way his men were driven out. Chloe must be mistaken."

"No, sah, I warn't mistook at all," persisted the old woman, earnestly. "Dat war de man, sah—dat same Englishman; fur, naow I t'ink of it, I heerd him holler, jest like a cavalry ossifer '*Forward—trot—march*,' and den he done use dem English cuss-word, and call one of de debbils a *bloke*. I hyar dat, Marse Tom. I'll sw'ar to dat. *Bloke* war de word he say. I hyar him."

"That is something," said Tom, thoughtfully. "I am not sure whether it is the same man; but no one but an Englishman would call another a *bloke*, in this part of the country. It is English slang, pure and simple, and our people have not learned it. The leader of the gang is an Englishman, at all events, though who he is we do not know. The question is, where has he gone? We can only follow the trail. If it be Berkeley, he will not dare to harm the ladies, and he has taken the children with them. Come, let us ask Wild Cat what he thinks of it all."

They went back to the group of men who were still watching the Indian, and the chief rose from his quest to say, cheerfully:

"I have found the trail, and I can lift it, with my eyes shut."

CHAPTER IV.

TAKING THE SCENT.

THE morning sun cast its level beams over the green prairies of Satanta county, when a band of horsemen gathered at the edge of the Collingsworth Ranch, as if waiting for some one, and before the lord of day was completely clear of the horizon, the group was reinforced by the appearance of several more horsemen, at a walk, coming from the ranch-house and the log-palace of the Glasgow Cattle Company.

By the time they had all assembled there was a party of thirty or forty men, stout, hearty fellows, well mounted, each leading two horses with him, one of them saddled, to carry a pair of capacious saddle-bags, such as the mail-riders use, the other bare-backed and following its leader.

These men all rode like cowboys—that is to say, as if they had grown up on horseback. They sat in deep Mexican saddles of the old pattern, as if they had no thought of difficulty in maintaining their seats, the bridles of the ponies hanging loosely from their hands, often dropped on the saddle-bow, when the riders had something else to do. The saddles were all double-girthed, before and behind, with the never-failing Mexican *cincha* of horsehair, with its double rings and thong fastening, while each had a pair of deep bags behind, swelled

but with the provisions that the men carried for themselves. Their horses would need but little in the face of the abundant herbage that covered the prairie on every side.

The spare horses were also loaded with food, but the riders had not forgotten to take a few feeds of oats; for the broncho pony, when he does get a meal of oats, will work twice as hard as he would on grass.

These men were all armed to the teeth, in the familiar phrase; that is to say, each had a pair of revolvers in his belt, a Winchester rifle lying across his knees on the pommel of the saddle ready for instant use, and no lack of ammunition.

Hank, the Nailer, the new sheriff of the county, was the chief of the band, and he was accompanied by Tom Field, "Punch" Burleson, "Colonel" Callahan, "Limp" Balstrop, and "Deaf" Smith, with the best shots and most reliable men on their ranches.

The old judge had pleaded to be allowed to come along; but the sheriff had set his face sternly against any such thing, and the old man was sent to the log-house of the company to take care of his remaining daughter.

Hank knew that the judge, being old, however good his spirit, would only be in the way of any rapid movements, and might easily get killed, without a chance to defend himself.

The party that set out from the ranch that beautiful morning was composed of none but true and tried men, who could shoot at sight, and never potter over the aim, and they could all be depended on to "stick" in whatever fight they might be drawn into.

As the sun rose clear of the horizon, Wild Cat made his appearance in front of the party on a paint broncho, leading three others; long streaming ends of ribbons in his crest; his bronzed torso bare; the old chief's weapons heavier than any other man's in the crowd, for he had no less than four revolvers in his belt, and carried a long lance, besides his rifle, and a hatchet at the saddle. His pack of provisions was the smallest of the party, for he came of the old stock of men who made the business of prairie warfare a science, and could move with the least possible amount of impediments to long, swift marches.

But he had three ponies in the string beside him, for he would have to do the most riding of any there, and Wild Cat, being an Indian, never spared his horse.

As soon as they had assembled together, the Sheriff of Satanta spoke to the men:

"Naow, boys, we're a-goin' off after the men that's stole aour stock, and the trail may lead us into another State. I've got the papers that make ye all special constables in the service of the caounty; but ef there's a man hyer that don't want to obey orders, the sooner he goes back the better. Air ye ready?"

A wild yell was the answer, and Hank shouted: "Come on, then! Injun file, and don't git ahead of the trailer."

Then the band started at a gentle trot, the Indian ahead; the sheriff following him at a distance of about ten yards; Top Notch Tom next, and the rest stringing out behind.

As they went the pace grew sharper, till at the end of the first mile they were all at a full trot, sweeping on over the green prairie, on the broad and plain trail of the stampede of the night before.

Wild Cat kept his eyes glancing along the surface of the ground ahead, the broad trail being as plain as a high road; but every now and then he strayed to the edge, first on one side, then the other, to see if any horses had branched off the main trail. The track of wheels was quite plain in the daylight, and the men rode on rapidly, till they had covered ten or twelve miles, at a sharp trot and the ponies were blowing.

Then they slacked up to a walk, and went on another mile, when they resumed the pace at which they had started, the trail leading on, straight as an arrow, passing the limits of the ranches of the Blue Fork, and coming out, by the middle of the forenoon, in the open country beyond the bounds of civilization, twenty miles from Satanstown.

All the time the wheel track never failed them, and the Indian rode on steadily, for another hour, when he suddenly halted and held up his hand, as a signal to the rest to stop.

Nothing appeared on the trail immediately near them; but, far ahead, there was a darkish spot, which the keen eyes of the chief had detected as he rode, and he galloped forward to examine it more closely, followed at a walk by the rest.

When they got up to him he had halted, and was searching around what was evidently the remains of a camp-fire, which must have been made the night before, for the ashes were yet warm, and when Wild Cat, who had dismounted, pushed aside the white dust, he revealed a reddish glow, that told of embers remaining alight.

By the side of the fire, the wheel tracks showed where the wagon had been halted the night before, and the whole prairie round was covered with the tracks and droppings of horses, that told of a general halt of the whole drove which the robbers had taken.

Wild Cat was talking earnestly to Tom Field, and the young man translated the words to the sheriff, as he spoke.

"He says that the robbers must have stopped the stampede here, and that they will probably break up the trail, a little further on. He thinks that we shall have trouble in finding where the women and children have been carried, or the men would not have brought the wagon and made such a plain trail."

"Why not?" asked Hank, the Nailer, soberly. "It seems to me that they took the wagon to give the poor things a chance to keep up."

Wild Cat shook his head, and obstinately repeated his conviction, that the trail of the wagon would not be the right one to follow.

When he was questioned as to his reason for the assertion, he astonished them by telling that there was a member of his own tribe among the fugitives, and if so, they could not expect an old warrior to be such a fool as to let his enemy track him home when he could hide the trail.

"What makes him think there is an Indian in the party, and why not more than one?" asked the sheriff of Tom.

Tom translated the question, and gave the answer of the chief in these words:

"He says that if there had not been one there, he would never have found what he did."

"And what has he found?" asked Hank.

Wild Cat held up a feather which lay on the ground, dyed red at one end, and said:

"That came from the head of a man of my tribe. No white man ever wore such a feather. In a little time I can tell who wore it."

Then he mounted his pony and rode on again, the distance traversed that morning being at least thirty miles without a halt, and as he had predicted, before another three miles had been traversed the trail broke up into a maze of tracks that diverged in every direction, radiating like the spokes of a wheel.

Wild Cat called a halt at last, and went forward with Tom Field to examine the trails and decide which they should follow.

The accuracy of his previous announcement that there was an Indian in the party, soon received a striking exemplification by the discovery of an arrow, broken off at the shaft by the feather, which Wild Cat declared had been shot into a bullock, wounding the animal, which had fallen and then got up, breaking the shaft in the operation, and finally getting off with its life.

On the shaft of the arrow was a peculiar mark, at which the old chief laughed in a queer, silent way, as if much amused, and said to Tom:

"It is the arrow of Fawn Foot. He has never been on the war-path, and thinks he can hide a trail. He has tried to kill the bullock, and the beast has run away. No warrior would have left that shaft behind him. But they don't know who is coming behind them yet. When they do, they will do better. Even Fawn Foot comes of my tribe, and his father was a great warrior."

There seemed to be a pride in the old chief in the cunning of his foe, who came of the same tribe.

CHAPTER V. FULL CRY.

THE pursuit, from that moment, was conducted with great rapidity. Wild Cat keeping his course straight in the middle of the radiating trails and not paying any apparent attention to any particular one track.

As far as the white men could see, the marks were those of ponies and cattle, intermixed, in great numbers; but, as they got further, an effort seemed to have been made to separate the animals into their kinds, and keep the ponies together in one herd, with the cattle in another.

On and still on they went, as soon as this had been discovered, and the cowboys noticed that the Indian disregarded the cattle-tracks, and followed those of the ponies.

High noon had come, and the ponies of the pursuers were covered with foam from the long and rapid ride; but the Indian kept on as if he had no idea of fatigue, or regard for the condition of his mount, till the sun had passed the meridian, when Wild Cat suddenly wheeled his horse, with a gesture that told he wished to halt the party behind him.

Then he dismounted from his pony, and shifted the saddle from its back to that of the first of his spare mounts, resumed his seat, and rode away at a sharp trot, the rest of the party following his example.

The change from the wearied animals, that they had been pushing to the utmost, to those that had been led behind in a string, was not one which would have seemed to a stranger, very promising, save for a short time; but the animals that had come the same distance, with no weight to carry, as soon as they felt the pressure of their rider's knees, started off as if they had come fresh from the stable.

Away they went, faster than before, still following the central track, and before they had ridden an hour, came to a spot which more than one recognized, as being fifty miles from

the border of the old cattle-company fence-line, and sixty from Satanstown.

The men looked haggard already, their faces gray and set; for the fatigue was telling on them, and their second set of ponies was showing symptoms of collapse.

Another halt and change of mounts, and again they pressed on, in the midst of the maze of tracks, Wild Cat seeming to have no idea but keeping in the middle, as far as he could. The afternoon sun began to slope to the horizon, and they had ridden eighty miles in twelve hours, when Wild Cat who had kept in the advance from the beginning, as fresh, to all seeming, as when he started, gave a yell of triumph and pointed ahead, where figures moving were plainly discernible on the green plain, resolving themselves into a clump of ponies, running on, under the charge of three horsemen, who were plying their whips and pressing on, to escape from their pursuers.

The sight seemed to put new spirits into the cowboys, for they echoed the yell, and began to whip up their wearied ponies.

That the band in front was a part of the robbers they had no doubt, and that the fugitives had seen their pursuers was equally certain.

They had a mob of several hundred ponies to drive, and had so much difficulty in getting the animals to gallop, that the least experienced of the pursuers surmised that they had come a long way, and that the ponies were giving in.

And the pursuers, though they were by no means fresh, had the advantage that they could kill their horses, if need be, while the pace of the mob in front could only be that of the slowest pony in the crowd.

Therefore they began to gain on the fugitives rapidly, and, in half an hour from the time they first sighted them, had crept up within a quarter of a mile and began to shoot.

There were but three men in the party driving the ponies, and Limpy Balstop, as he rode, shouted:

"Them's my bronchos, boys! I know the colors! I kep' 'em in bands."

And, sure enough, the colors of the band of ponies in front of the fugitives were uniform, the prevailing tint being gray, which made the band all the more conspicuous, while the horses of the drivers were bay, all of them.

The sharp reports of the rifles, and the spiteful *ping! ping!* of the bullets soon had their effect; for the men who were trying to drive the ponies quickly abandoned their prize, and scampered away as fast as they could, round the flanks of the herd, which stopped as soon as it was left to itself, and the pursuers rode past it in triumph, chasing the three men, and letting the ponies take care of themselves.

Limpy Balstop was the only person who took much interest in the ponies, for they were his own; and he dropped out of the crowd, with one of his men, and examined the aspect of the herd. It was composed of some of the best of his stock; but the animals seemed to be utterly broken down, as if they had been mercilessly over-driven, with no regard to the consequences; and Limpy saw at a glance that it would be useless to attempt to drive them any further that day, or till they had had time to rest and graze, so as to recover their strength.

He did not tarry long, for he was a brave fellow, who never abandoned his friends, and besides all that, he had a great many more ponies that had been stolen, and felt comparatively safe in leaving the exhausted grays to get back to the ranch they had been driven from, under the charge of a single man. So he left one man behind, with instructions to take them back by easy stages to the home-ranch, while he pressed on after the rest of the avenging band, which had swept on, nearly half a mile, in the brief pause that he had made at the herd.

He could see the tall figure of the sheriff in advance of the main party, following Top Notch Tom and the Indian, who rode side by side, and they had neared the three fugitives, while the white puffs of smoke from the rifles and pistols told that they were hunting them down, as hard as they knew how.

The three men had become separated now, and one was far ahead of the rest, on a large and powerful horse, which Limpy thought he recognized as one of the best of his grade animals, between a broncho mare and a thoroughbred horse.

The other two robbers were whipping their horses frantically, and trying their best to get off, but the shots were whizzing past them so fast that Limpy thought the task useless, and before he could get near the pursuers, one of the horses of the fugitives dropped, shot dead by a bullet from Hank, the Nailer's, rifle, and the man who had been on his back was standing up and waving his hat, as a sign of surrender, as the party dashed up to him.

The irate rancher was so much excited with the chase, that he shouted out, though no one could hear him, at that distance:

"Shoot the darned boss-thief, boys! shoot him!"

And it seemed, for a moment, as if the men who came up to the dismounted robber, as he

waved his hat, would be hard to restrain, for the flashes of the pistols were frequent; but Limpy saw Hank, the Nailer, wheel his horse round, and wave his pistol, as if to forbid any harm to the prisoners, when two men stopped, jumped off their ponies, and proceeded to bind the man, hand and foot, with a celerity that argued practice.

Then, as Limpy rode by, one of them called to him:

"Sheriff says, go on! No time to waste on one man, while there's more left. We'll take keer of this snoozer."

And away went Limpy after the rest of the party, in time to see the second man's horse brought down by another shot, when he was captured as quickly as the first. A second pair of men jumped off their ponies to bind this prisoner, while the rest went after the third man on the large horse; but his animal appeared to be so far superior to the rest that a chase of another hour failed to place them any closer to him, while the sun was so near to the horizon that the pursuit seemed to be useless.

The Indian was the first to see this, and his pony stopped suddenly, while he held a short colloquy with Tom Field, the rest of the party glad to rest at any price; for even their hardened frames were incapable of supporting any more fatigue, for a while.

Then Tom said to Hank, the Nailer:

"Wild Cat says that the parties have broken up, as he expected, and he wants time to find the proper trail to follow. He proposes that we go into camp, and as soon as the moon rises, he will take his third spare pony, and try if he can lift the true trail. Are you willing?"

Hank, the Nailer, cast a glance of concern at his weary men and horses, as he answered:

"It's the best thing we can do. The hosses must have rest and a feed."

Then, turning to his men, he pursued:

"Go into camp, boys. Wild Cat will do what else there is to do, to-night."

The men needed no second bidding, for they jumped off their horses, as well as their stiffened limbs would allow them, and turned them loose at once, to feed and roll.

The toughness of the horses was manifest by the way in which they all lay down to roll in the grass, as soon as the saddles were taken off, most of them trying it before this could be done. They had had a tremendous ride, but they were not beat out by any means, and set to work on the green grass around them at once, as if they had only acquired a great appetite.

The halt had been made by the banks of a running stream, and the animals had been watered at short intervals, whenever they had a chance, during the afternoon, so that there was no need of the care that would have had to be exercised, had the water been scarce on the road.

As for the men, they got at the work of making fires and cooking their coffee for supper, with a readiness that smacked of the old cowboy, who lives in the saddle half his life, and sleeps on the ground all the year round, with no roof over his head.

And while they were making themselves and the animals comfortable for the night, wearied out with their unparalleled exertions, the Indian chief, who seemed to be insensible to fatigue, saddled his fourth pony for the day, and rode off along the trail, with Top Notch Tom by his side.

As soon as Wild Cat perceived that he was followed he turned to his friend, and said in his own tongue:

"Why does the Looking-Glass Fighter follow me? This is no work for you."

Tom Field's face was drawn and haggard as he replied, with the first emotion he had shown since he had started on the race.

"I know it, my friend; but remember that it is my children that have been stolen. I cannot rest with the others. Let me follow you. It may be that even I may be of use."

Those who think of Indians as cold and heartless, would have been surprised to see the way that Wild Cat's stern countenance softened, as he answered his friend:

"The white friend has spoken, and his words have gone to the heart of the red-man. If the little ones are not slain, they shall be recovered; but we must not let our eyes be blinded with tears. I have lost all the sons that the Great Spirit gave to me, and the name of Wild Cat will soon be wiped out forever. The white friend can come with me, if he will be silent."

Tom nodded, and the pair of strangely assorted friends pursued their way along the trail. It was not the first time that Top Notch Tom had found the help of the despised Indian, in the day of his trouble.

The warrior pursued his course, as long as the twilight lasted, and then sat down by his horse, on the prairie, saying:

"We must wait for the rising of the moon. It will be here in time. Till then, let us eat, for the heart of the fasting man is faint."

And he took out his little bag of dried meat, and began to eat, while Tom Field, too miserable to follow his example, stared at the ground, in a maze of sad thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.
THE WAGON.

AN hour after sunset the moon came out, nearly full yet, and the Indian rose from the ground and pursued his quest.

Tom Field accompanied him, mechanically, and the pair went on, walking and leading their horses, Wild Cat examining the ground as he went, till he stopped at last, and pointed ahead in the moonlight.

"The wagon," was all he said.

Tom started, and was about to leap on his horse, when Wild Cat added:

"It is the wagon, but there is no one with it. They have left it, when the horses were too tired to go further. Do you remember where we are now, white friend?"

Tom stared round him, vaguely.

"No, I remember nothing," he said, sadly.

"It seems as if my brain could not think."

Wild Cat shook his head.

"That is not what you were taught by me," he answered. "The perfect warrior knows no time when he cannot think. We are in the place where I trained you, when the man with the crooked eyes was alive. Do you not see the *motte* where you used to keep your cattle? It is yonder, and the men who stole the cattle have gone there to defend themselves."

Tom Field looked round him, and began to recognize the landmarks, as the Indian recalled them to his memory.

Yes; there was the low line of scrubby timber, that fringed the edge of the great natural corral where he had passed a peaceful year. He had first come to Texas a raw Yankee greenhorn or "tenderfoot," and the ranchers, of Sitanta, jealous of his handsome face and figure, had driven him from the county, for fear he might make love to the prettiest girl in the district.

There was the place where he had met poor "Old Cross-Eye," as he was called in derision, and, in the wild life of a Maverick-hunter, had learned the qualities of head and heart which had ended in making him the best fighter in Texas, with the sole exception of Hank the Nailer.

He had passed many unhappy hours when he first went there, an outcast from society in the county, with the brand of cowardice placed on him by men who could not distinguish between the natural desire of a sensitive temperament for peace, and the timidity that they scorned.

He had learned from the Indian beside him all the arts of savage warfare, and, in silence and solitude, had perfected himself in the deadly aim that had, since that time, become his most noted characteristic. There, too, he had learned the peculiar trick of shooting by the aid of a mirror, without looking at his object, which had earned him the name of "Top Notch Tom," and from thence he had gone back to the place whence he had been driven, a year before, to retrieve his reputation and win the bride who had once thought of him as a coward.

As the poor fellow thought of all he had lost, of the way in which that bride, his own Diana, had acknowledged her mistake and told him that she adored him for his courage, all the bitterness of desolation swept over him, and he broke into the muttered exclamation:

"Oh! Di, Di! where have they taken you, my darling?"

And the little ones too! His own daughters! The fair-haired baby, named after her mother, and sweet, prattling Nelly, who had been, as the old nigger said, saying her simple prayer, as the ruffians rushed into the house.

Where were they now? Were their fair young bodies torn by the wolves, or were they yet alive, in torture and the bitterness of humiliation?

But he had learned from the Indian the art of controlling his feelings, so he stifled the sob that came welling up to his breast, and asked Wild Cat calmly:

"Do you think they are in there, Wild Cat?"

The Indian nodded and said quietly:

"We have gone far enough. The horses will be in the way now. Let us leave them, and go forward on foot. We will steal into their camp, and find what they are doing. Perhaps the women and children are there."

He had hit upon the right way to interest his companion, for Tom at once stopped his horse, with the remark:

"I am ready to follow where you lead."

The country round them was intersected with *mottes* of timber, and the two friends led their horses into the nearest of these *mottes*, and tied them to trees in the shelter of the dense cover, so that no passer-by on the prairie outside, might see or hear them. They fed them with corn bountifully; for even the Indian had long since learned the value of solid feed in keeping up the strength of his animal, in white man's fashion. Then Wild Cat took his rifle over his arm; left his long lance leaning against a tree, and stepped forth into the open air, followed by Tom Field, when they resumed their course

toward a distant line of dark timber, which fringed the edge of the prairie to the north.

Wild Cat kept in the advance and Tom followed him, both men stooping low so as to blend their figures as far as possible with the long grass that grew breast high out there, where there was but little game to crop it close, and the buffalo had long since gone from the section.

In this cautious fashion they went on for near a mile, when Tom saw ahead of him what the keen senses of the Indian had discovered long before.

Out on the prairie lay the body of the stolen red wagon, broken down and abandoned by the robbers, and they went close up to it and examined it carefully.

It had evidently had the hardest kind of usage, but the immediate cause of its breakdown had been a plunge into a buffalo-wallow of the old sort, which had long been abandoned by the animals that had made it, but had remained in the shape of a rounded depression, at the side of which some burrowing creature had made a steep slope, down which the vehicle had plunged with a crash and overturned in the operation. One of the axles was broken in half close to the off wheel, and the wheel itself had rolled away and lay on the prairie.

Wild Cat looked all over the wreck and said to his friend, in a whisper of extreme caution:

"They are not far off, now."

"Why?" asked Tom.

"The wagon broke down when it was loaded, for look, here are the marks where one of the women fell on her feet."

He showed Tom, in the moonlight, the mark of a small foot, in the high-heeled modern shoe that ladies insist on wearing, and Tom gazed at it with a strange mingling of feelings.

The tiny mark, hardly larger than that made by a child, here in the midst of the wild prairie gave him a thrill that he could not control.

Wild Cat, whom nothing disturbed from his business, searched round the wagon for more tracks, and finally said:

"There are no more. The woman must have seen the upset coming and jumped out. The rest were thrown down, for here are the marks of hands and knees as they fell. The men have carried them off again, and did not notice the one mark. Fawn Foot was not here, or he would have made it come out. They are not far off. Come on."

Tom followed him stealthily, and the Kiowa stole toward the *motte* of timber which bordered the old corral, which Tom knew so well. Now that he was cooler, and saw a chance of finding his children, the young rancher began to recognize the features of the country, which, in fact, belonged to him by a legal title, for he had taken up a claim from the State of Texas for this land, long before, though he had not visited it for years.

He knew that before him there was a dense thicket of timber, encircling a large space of ground, that would not be suspected, from the outside, as containing anything remarkable, but which held near a thousand acres, in which a herd of cattle could be concealed for months, with no one to disturb them except the neighboring Indians of the territory, who had been his friends of the past.

Apart from the Indians and himself, no one, as far as he knew, had been acquainted with this hiding-place, where he had taken up the profession of a Maverick-hunter, in bygone days.

The only visitors he remembered to have ever seen there were three outlaws, headed by a man called Tomlinson, the first man he had ever killed in fair fight. The outlaw had come with two other desperadoes, called Long Charley and Poker Steve.

Both these men were dead, as far as he knew; for they had been reported shot, in the battles which had shaken Satanta county to its center, in the days of the fence-cutters' war.

Had the dead come to life, or had they been falsely reported slain? It was certain that no one but they knew of the existence of the Maverick-hunter's corral.

Thinking over all these things, he followed Wild Cat, who kept away from the place where Tom knew that the entrance of the corral was situated, and went off by a long circuit.

When they had walked for nigh an hour, Tom ventured to ask:

"Where are we going to, Wild Cat?"

"To the ravine where we used to come to get beef, in the old times," was the reply, and then Tom knew what he meant, though he had forgotten all about it before.

One side of the natural corral, which lay toward the Indian Territory, was made by a deep ravine, worn by the torrents of many winters, and this side was generally regarded as inaccessible, though Tom knew that the Indians had frequently come that way, when he was a Maverick-hunter, to take toll of his herds, as the condition on which they remained his friends, and prevented anybody else from stealing the cattle.

It was a long, tedious walk in the moonlight, with the necessity of keeping hidden all the while, and creeping when the grass was not

high enough to shelter them from view, if any one were watching.

At last they had reached the end of the long ravine, that began in the open prairie, like a beat-crack in summer, but went on, getting deeper and deeper in the bowels of the earth, till it found its bottom, at least a hundred feet below the surface of the country above; and here Wild Cat halted, and whispered:

"We go up here: this is the spot. Keep your eyes and ears open, for they may be on guard. If Fawn Foot is with them, he will remember the place, but they have not yet got the news that we are after them."

"How do you know that?" asked Tom.

"The man we chased went the other way. He was a Mexican, and he cannot be here till the moon is so high."

And the Indian pointed to a part of the sky which represented an hour or two later.

His positive assertion puzzled Tom.

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

Wild Cat smiled.

"The man was frightened. We got so near him, at one time, that he had to throw off the load on his saddle, while you were behind with the men we took. He lost his way; but he will find it."

"What makes you say he is a Mexican?"

"I saw him," was the reply.

And Tom said no more, for he had had experience, more than once, of the marvelous powers of sight of the Indian.

They slowly climbed up the side of the ravine, till they were within a few feet of the top, when Wild Cat signed to Tom to stop, and cautiously preceded him to the very brink of the chasm.

With a slowness that was almost imperceptible, even to Tom who was watching him, he protruded his head over the top, and cast a keen, searching glance around him.

Then he beckoned to Tom, and the two went over the top of the ravine, to the plain above.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

AS the young rancher raised his head over the edge of the plain, he saw the whole expanse of the natural corral, that he remembered so well, covered with horses, some grazing, but most of them lying down, as if too tired to eat. There were no cattle among them, and no appearance of guards, while the animals did not start and snort, as they would have done at the scent of strangers at most times.

Wild Cat, as soon as he got to the top, lay flat on his stomach, and beckoned to Tom to come up beside him.

"You see I was right," he whispered. "The horses are here; but they have lost the cattle. The men are divided and they have overdriven the herds. They did not get here long ago, or the ponies would be fresher. The men are asleep."

"Where do you suppose they are?" whispered Tom, looking over the flat plain, and seeing no signs of fires.

"In the *motte*, by the old hut, where you used to live. Fawn Foot has guided them there. The women and children are there."

Tom trembled with excitement.

"Then why not advance and capture them?"

Wild Cat slowly turned his head, with the habit of precaution that never leaves the Indian on the war-path. There was a strong expression of grave reprobation on his face, as he said:

"Is my brother still blinded, that he cannot see danger? The men are many, and we are two. To fight and get killed is the act of a white fool. The warrior never strikes, till he knows he can kill. First see how many there are, and then we will fight them, if it be best."

Tom, silenced by the rebuke, followed the Indian as he crawled forward among the ponies; and the animals did not seem to be frightened at the sight of the two men. They were too tired to scare.

They moved out of the road where they were feeding, and one or two got up and shook themselves; but these last began to graze at once, and there was no disturbance among them, as might have been expected.

Through the middle of the herd they passed, and Tom recognized most of his friend Limpy Balstrop's ponies, divided already into the herds, of the same color, into which they had been wont to consort, at their old ranch.

Soon the dark outline of the *motte* rose ahead of them, and the Indian stopped suddenly and sunk down flat behind a group of ponies, Tom following his example.

They remained still for nearly a minute, when Wild Cat, by imperceptible degrees, raised his head again, and looked over toward the *motte*. Apparently the result of his glance reassured him, for presently he rose again, and crept forward, followed by Tom, till they had gained the shadow of the trees.

As they went, Tom noticed that there were several recumbent figures lying in the moonlight, at the entrance to the old path, that he remembered well as leading to the hut he himself had once occupied with Old Cross-Eye, and

* See "Old Cross-Eye, the Maverick-Hunter," and "Top Notch Tom," its sequel.

recognized in them sleeping men; but whether white or red, he could not tell.

As soon as they were safe in the shadow of the *motte* he asked Wild Cat who he thought they could be, and received the answer:

"It is the enemy. They are whites and Mexicans; but Fawn Foot is not there."

"How do you know?" asked Tom, hardly daring to believe the power of the Indian, though he had often seen it exercised.

Wild Cat was not averse to giving lectures on his old arts of trailing and warlike divination, so he began at once:

"If Fawn Foot were here the horses would not have been left without a guard on the ravine side. He knows the danger there. He has gone off with the cattle, and taken the trail toward the land of the yellow men," (he meant the Mexicans). "There are no cattle here, and you saw that the tracks went off. They could not keep up with the horses, and had to be sent off in another direction. The ponies came this way, and the women and children are with them. I did not think so at first; but now I am sure. The wagon had them inside, and I thought they would put them on ponies and send the wagon off in another direction to hide the trail; but Fawn Foot left them because they had no beef with them, and he is with the cattle. These men are not Indians, or they would not be so careless. The Indian warrior never sleeps till he has brought his plunder back to the tepees of his tribe. Therefore we can go forward safely, and when we have found the children we can bring the men we left behind to take them back."

The words comforted Tom greatly, and he made no further trouble; but obeyed every order that was issued by the stern old Indian.

Wild Cat crept through the woods till he had reached a spot, in the immediate vicinity of the old hut, where Tom had lived, once on a time. As they drew nearer, they heard the sound of voices, in earnest, but low conversation; and the tones of a woman's voice struck Tom's ear like a strain of music, for he recognized the voice of his own wife, talking with Mattie Howe, one of her friends, who had come to visit her, along with Tom's own sister, Lucy Field.

To be so near her, and yet not dare to reveal himself, was a sore trial to Tom; but a glance at Wild Cat's stolid face showed him the necessity of silence, and he followed the old chief.

Wild Cat led him on till they had reached a spot immediately in rear of the old hut, which they could see, still standing, though ruined and dilapidated.

A fire was burning in the center, just as it used to do, the smoke escaping through a hole in the roof, and around it were gathered the sleeping figures of his family, as Tom saw at a glance.

Yes, there was no mistaking them. There were the little bundles on the floor, which he knew contained the bodies of his children, the eldest only three years old, the youngest hardly two.

His sister Lucy lay, with one of the children on her arm, as if she had hushed it to sleep, and beside her he could see, by the color of the loosened hair, her friends, Lottie Clark and Vivian Gay, while Mattie Howe was sitting up by the fire, with his wife, Diana, talking in low tones, and glancing fearfully round, as if they were afraid of being overheard.

Tom trembled violently, till he was warned, by a touch on his arm, that the Indian feared his loss of self-control. Then he lay still, trying to catch what was said, and soon heard his wife.

"Oh Mattie," she was saying, "if I only knew where Tom was, it would not be so bad. But they would never have dared to come and make such a daring outrage, if they had not killed him first."

"But they knew Tom was away at Satanstown, dear, and probably that was the very reason they took the time they did to come."

"And what a time it was, Mattie! and what a time we have had ever since! I wonder we are left alive!"

Mattie shuddered.

"Oh, it was the first that was the worst, when they came rushing in! I thought surely that they were real Indians, and all the horrible stories I had ever heard came rushing into my mind. But they have not treated us so badly since then, and the leader is quite a gentleman in his manners when he chooses."

"Yes," said Di, bitterly, "when he chooses; but I have seen him when he did not choose, and he can be as vile as any of them."

Tom listened intently. He began to think he knew whom she meant, as Mattie asked:

"Why, what do you mean? Have you ever seen him before?"

"I have. He used to have the post that Harry Kimble has now, at the head of the cattle company's ranch. His name is Berkeley, and he comes from England, though he has changed his name and tries to make us think he is a Mexican. But I knew him."

"Then why did you not speak to him and ask him to spare us?"

"Because I knew that, if he thought we did

not know him, he would be likely to treat us better than if I let him know I recognized him. He is a villain who would hesitate at nothing."

Mattie sighed deeply.

"What a pity! and he so handsome! Really I thought he seemed like a robber in the old stories, he was so polite after we got here."

"He does it for a purpose. What it is I don't know, but it is evidently his interest to keep us alive and quiet in some way."

Mattie yawned.

"Oh, dear, how tired I am!" she said. "And yet I fell into a doze in the wagon before it upset. But it was very hard, the first long, terrible ride. I don't wonder the poor children are exhausted. It was enough to kill anybody."

Diana Field turned her head toward the sleeping children with a glance of ineffable tenderness, as she said softly:

"My darlings! The only comfort in all this trial is that they are not separated from me. If they had torn them away, I think I should have gone crazy. As it is, I hardly know whether I am awake or asleep. It seems like a dream, that we could be assaulted here in the midst of our friends. I cannot make out what the object of the villains can be."

"Perhaps they mean to carry us off to some dark cavern in the mountains, and keep us there till some one comes and rescues us," the Yankee girl suggested.

Diana Field shook her head impatiently.

"Go to sleep, Mattie. You don't know what you are talking about! You don't know. Go to sleep."

Then, as Mattie crept off, she added, more softly:

"Poor child! Heaven grant that you never may. Go to sleep. God will take care of us, and when the boys find out what has been done, they will be on the track, before long. But if they do not find us within a day or two, I am afraid it will be too late."

Then she turned to her brooding attitude over the fire, and Mattie lay down and soon was fast asleep, to all seeming, from the sounds of her regular breathing.

Then Tom Field looked at Wild Cat, and the Indian chief nodded his head.

The young rancher crept forward and scratched at one of the posts at the corner of the crazy old hut, so that Diana started and looked around.

She looked that way for near a minute, as if seeking to find what the noise was, and Tom, not certain whether to show himself or not, gave a low hiss.

The woman by the fire started again, drew her skirts closer together, glancing down at the floor, as if she thought a snake was hidden there; and Tom, seeing that she was getting more nervous than before, gave utterance to a low whisper:

"Diana!"

It had the effect he intended, for she knew his voice, and seemed to realize, from the stealthy way in which he spoke, that he was in danger.

She smiled to herself, and shifted her place by the fire, as if she was cramped, then stretched her arms and yawned. Finally she came over to the side of the hut whence the whisper had proceeded, and whispered back:

"Is it you, Tom?"

"Yes," said the rancher. "How many of them are there, and where are they?"

Diana considered a moment.

"There are twenty here, and the rest have gone with the cattle, somewhere. The captain is in the wood on the other side of this hut, not ten feet away from me, with his men by him. They are to move in the morning."

"Where? Do you know?"

"No. Are you alone?"

"No. Wild Cat is with me. Can you be secret, Diana? All will depend on you now."

"I will do what I can," she whispered back.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WARNING.

THE curtain of night was over the hut, and the faint light of the fire was hardly enough to show the figures within, while all without the building was quite dark under the trees from the contrast with the moonlight outside the *motte*.

Tom and the Indian, guided by the former, had taken their place in the thickest shadow, and both were covered with dead branches, and the rubbish that had fallen from the ruins of the hut as it went to pieces year after year.

Tom, by cautiously lifting his head in the line of the corner-post of the house, could see the recumbent figures that Diana had spoken of as "the captain and his men," and knew that he was in deadly peril if they awakened or heard the whispering of himself and his wife.

As he was thinking what to do, he felt his arm touched, and Wild Cat was beside him.

The Indian put his lips close to the young man's ear, and whispered:

"They are waking. Lie still. Get your gun ready. If it comes to a fight, we can get off."

Tom whispered to Diana:

"Pretend to sleep."

She was already lying down by the edge of the hut, and the quick-witted woman understood him, and remained where she was, while the young rancher shifted his rifle to the front, and waited for the outcome of the Indian's warning.

There was a slight stir among the sleeping men in the moonlight outside and one of them muttered something and turned over in his sleep, while another yawned and stretched his arms in the air, with the exclamation:

"Gosh! Ain't it cold! Here, Bill, hunk up closer. The blanket's all on your side."

Bill gave a growl and a curse, but submitted to the change, and the noise quieted down, when Tom listened attentively, fearing that the last man might not be sleeping again, till the loud snore that came from thence showed him his mistake. Then he crept up closer to his wife, and began to whisper to her what he intended to do, by going back and attacking the camp from the side of the ravine before dawn, when he again felt his arm pulled by Wild Cat, and saw that the Indian was listening intently, with his head on one side, to something that Tom could not hear himself.

"What is it?" he asked.

Wild Cat began to crawl back at once.

"Come back!" he whispered, energetically.

"Have you no ears? He comes!"

And then, without waiting to tell what he meant, he crept back to the shelter of the wood, till he had reached a place where it was not possible for any one to see or hear him, when he explained:

"It is the man who was with the ponies, and who got off. He is coming back. I hear the hoofs of his horse, but it is tired. He will tell the camp, and we shall lose the women, if we do not kill him before he can get in."

Tom nodded.

"Go on," he said, quietly. "I'll follow and do as you tell. Why not shoot him as he comes?"

Wild Cat made no answer but to creep through the thick brushwood to the edge of the prairie, when the sound of the horse's hoofs came plainly to Tom's ears at last.

The rider, whoever he was, had not yet come in sight in the moonlight, but he could not be far off; and Tom remembered that the prairie was of the rolling kind, on that side of the *motte*, and surmised that the man might be hidden in a hollow, at this time.

The echo of the horse's feet showed that the animal was coming at a labored gallop, and every now and then it slackened to a trot for a little while, as if it were nearly tired out.

Wild Cat listened a few minutes, and then said quickly:

"He is behind the third swell from here, and if we can get to the next before him we can stop him! Come!"

Then he stole off over the prairie, stooping low to the level of the tall grass, till he got to the top of the swell, when he threw himself on his face and crawled over the ridge like a snake, followed by Tom Field. They succeeded in getting over, and rolled down the next slope, till the ground covered them, when Wild Cat rose to his feet and ran forward with his friend, till they had nearly reached the top of the ridge on the other side of the little valley.

"Now," he whispered excitedly, "we have got him if we are good warriors. No shooting. As he comes over the hill, catch him. Do as I do."

Tom hardly knew what he meant, but he followed every motion of the Indian. Wild Cat threw his rifle and pistols to the earth, and hastily undid the belt that had contained the weapons.

The sound of the horse's feet came plainer to their ears, and they could tell that he was ascending the other side of the swell, behind which they were sheltered.

In another moment the figure of the animal came over the ridge just above them, and Wild Cat leaped up almost under the feet of the horse, with his hatchet in his hand, and struck the animal full in the face. The horse made a rear in the air, and came down again, when Tom who saw that the hatchet had only frightened it, and that the rider was trying to draw a pistol, clubbed his own rifle and dealt the man a sweeping blow on the side of the head, under which he dropped like a log, and fell off the animal, helpless and stunned.

Before he could recover his feet, Wild Cat was on him with his knife, stabbing desperately at his breast, and the stranger gave a low gasp, and lay still in the moonlight.

The exhausted horse did not attempt to run away, after the blow of the Indian had failed of its effect, but staggered a few paces and fell prone on the grass, as if it had been completely broken down.

Then Wild Cat spoke to Tom, in his grave way, saying:

"The white friend has done well. He is worthy to be one of the tribe. Now we have a chance. Go and get your horse. Ride to the camp, and rouse the rest. Bring them down to the ravine. I will stay here, and watch that they do not steal off in the morning. If they get wind of this, before day, they will run; but

I will be with them, and leave sign on the trail. You have been a good scholar, and can trail, if it be not too hard. I have spoken. Go."

As he spoke, he turned to the dead man, and looked carefully at him, to be sure he was quite out of the reach of reanimation; then went to the east, and made a skirt round the base of the swell, till he had regained the *motte*, followed by Tom, who thought that way the easiest, till they reached the end of the ravine, where it merged into the plain above, when Tom went down it in haste, and Wild Cat entered the *motte* to gain the hut once more.

Tom crept cautiously, but quickly, along the bottom of the ravine; for he knew that every moment was precious; and gained the *motte* where he had left his own pony, with that of the Indian. The animals were both much refreshed by their rest and feed, and both had stopped eating; and laid themselves down at the foot of the trees.

He roused them up, and led them off toward the camp, where he had left his comrades, which he reached in less than twenty minutes, after leaving the *motte*, very well satisfied with his progress so far.

The contrast between the two camps was marked rather unpleasantly, to him, before he could get to the company of his friends; for, as he neared the bivouac, the flash of a rifle admonished him that he had been seen, and the bullet whistled in such close proximity to his head, that he ducked involuntarily.

And the sound of the shot roused the whole of the sleepers in a moment, when they rushed into a line facing him, and he began to be afraid he was going to get a volley.

To avoid this contingency, he stopped his course and waved his hand in the moonlight, when the firing stopped and a cheer was sent up, as the men recognized his figure.

It had been the fact that he was coming back alone, though he had gone off with the Indian, that had deceived them, and as soon as they knew him, he was permitted to ride into camp.

A few hurried words to Hank, the Nailer; a short consultation with the ranchers, and the whole camp was roused.

The horses, rested already so that they were capable of a gallop, were brought up and saddled, and a good feed of corn given to them; for the sheriff knew that they might need all their strength that night, and after that the corn might not be needed.

Tom was impatient to start, for fear the robbers might get off with their captives, before the cowboys could reach the camp; but Hank was inexorable.

"We can't have but one boss, Tom," he said, when the young raucher remonstrated with him against the waste of time in feeding the horses. "I'm Sheriff of Satanta, and this is my posse. If it took you only twenty minutes to reach hyar, from whar you had your hosses, and it's only a mile from thar to the camp, we've got time enough, and that's as good as too much. I ain't the man to go into a fight, till I know the men and hosses is fit fur their work. Naow, Tom, it's no use talking to me. If you want to see your wife, safe and sound, leave things to me, and I'll git her aout all right, if she's to be got. Why, man, don't ye think my wife's her sister, and Helen jest crazy over it? D'ye think I'd dare to go back to the house, if I didn't have Di, along? Go and be quiet."

And the sharp reprimand had its effect on Tom, for he had to own to himself that he was not quite cool enough to manage an affair of the kind on which he was engaged.

At last, after a delay that seemed endless to Tom, but which was really less than an hour after his first appearance in camp, the Sheriff of Satanta set out on his way toward the ravine; and the good effect of the feed the horses had taken was evident at once in the way they stepped out, as if they had not had an eighty-mile march that day.

Tom led them round to the ravine, the men taking single file as they neared the vicinity of the corral, and walking their horses.

Down the ravine they went, the rest of the horses having been left behind in the camp, and at last got to the place, which Tom recognized as the one where he and Wild Cat had climbed up, when they visited the enemy's camp before.

The men got off their animals, and the arduous ascent began. When they got to the top, Tom was ahead, and acted as he had seen Wild Cat do, by cautiously peeping over the edge of the bank.

The stolen horses were still there, though most of them had got up and were feeding, in a way that showed they were getting over their fatigue.

He called to the men to come up quietly, and creep as soon as they got to the top, and the first man to get up was Hank, the Nailer.

He cast a swift glance over the field, and said to Tom quietly:

"Where are they?"

"Over by the *motte*."

"Then we can't get there, with all these men, without being seen, if there is any one awake."

"They were asleep, the last time we came, and we got in without being seen."

"Ye hadn't all these men, then. We must

trust to luck and a charge. It isn't more than three hundred yards."

Then he turned to his men, as they lay round him, flat behind the horses, and said, in a low, but distinct tone:

"Boys, we've got to get over to those woods. Get behind the hosses, as nigh as ye kin, and don't fire a shot till ye hear my rifle. When I talk, you kin. Foller me, and keep right behind."

Then the long file of men crept forward over the grass, among the ponies, for near a hundred yards, when the animals that had been rested enough to get back a portion of their native spirit, began to snort, and they heard a man call out from the shelter of the *motte*:

"Git up, boys! Some one's arter the hosses!"

Then up rose the Sheriff of Satanta, with a wild yell, that was echoed by all his men, and they rushed forward, with no further effort at concealment.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BATTLE.

THE sound of the first yell of the cowboys startled the ponies in the corral, so that they stampeded to the edge of the ravine, and stood there, huddled in a bunch, shuddering with fear, but not daring to plunge down the declivity; and the stampede gave the attacking party an advantage, for it made such a confusion in front of the enemy's camp that the assailants were enabled to rush on, almost into the midst of the robbers, before the latter could get a full sight of them.

Then dark figures rushed out of the shadow of the *motte*, and the flashes of rifles came from the edge of the timber, while the cowboys answered with a perfect hail of bullets, which went whistling through the air, over the heads of the robbers as they ran on to the assault.

It did not take long to decide the fight, for the robbers were not more than twenty in number, while the cowboys nearly doubled them, and were all well armed and courageous.

The gap of two hundred yards that separated them was soon traversed, as hard as the men could run, and a fierce conflict commenced, in the edge of the wood, as the cowboys and robbers closed in a death-struggle.

Top Notch Tom and the sheriff were in the advance, never throwing away a shot, the former pressing on with the one object of getting to the hut and rescuing his wife before she was hurt in the battle, while the sheriff, cooler than his brother-in-law, was set on driving the men from the vicinity of that very hut, for fear the flying bullets might hit the women by accident.

But the whole affair did not take long to bring to a conclusion. Half a minute later, Tom Field was in the hut, with his wife in his arms; his children cowering down under the shelter of the timbers of the framework; the girls shrieking; the children crying; the men outside cursing and firing; all the hideous confusion of the battle raging round them, but none of the females hurt yet, by great good luck.

Then came a rush by the hut, through the thickness of the wood, and the cowboys went crashing through the brushwood.

The flashes of the rifles in the immediate vicinity became fewer, but the tremendous crashing of the reports, in the wood beyond, told of the fierce conflict that was raging there, despite of the paucity of numbers. Modern repeating rifles make the shock of a detachment as sanguinary as was the meeting of a whole regiment, in the days of muzzle-loaders.

But it did not last long, and within five minutes the wood was quiet, in the neighborhood, and Tom found time to ask his wife:

"Any one hurt here?"

"I—I think not," was the shuddering reply, as Diana shrunk closer to her husband's breast. "Oh, Tom! isn't it terrible?"

Then the girls began to cry hysterically, as the first excitement wore off, and the little children, pale and palsied with fear of the noise that had been raging round them, were hushed to rest in the arms of their mother and father, and there was no one near to disturb them, for nearly a quarter of an hour more.

There was much to ask and answer, and Tom found himself too busy to notice anything else, till he asked:

"And Wild Cat; where is the chief? Have you not seen him?"

Before they could answer him, they heard the sounds of men coming back through the cover, yelling in triumph, and the voice of Hank, the Nailer, shouted through the woods:

"Hilloa, Tom! Tom Field! where are ye?"

Tom stepped out of the hut to answer, and in a few minutes more the cowboys came back in couples and small groups, all talking together about the fight, and counting the men they had killed, while Hank found time to come into the hut and tell Tom what had transpired.

It seemed that the cowboys had run into an ambush that they had not suspected, a little further off, near the edge of the *motte*, where it abutted on the open prairie to the north, and had lost several men, while the strange robbers had made a counter attack on them.

It seemed that they had had a second party

there, with horses for the crowd, and the second party had made the first attack, throwing the cowboys into confusion for a few minutes, and threatening a stampede, which had only been checked by the resolution of Hank, the Nailer, and the sudden appearance of Wild Cat, who had risen in the rear of the robbers' ambush, and shot down their chief, restoring the fight.

The enemy had taken to their horses and fled in confusion, leaving seven of their number dead on the field, and three more wounded too badly to flee.

Then the cowboys had returned to the hut to concert further measures, and Hank, the Nailer, concluded:

"Naow, Tom, the sooner we git aout of this, the better it will be fur us. Wild Cat says that there's more of 'em where these came from, and that they ain't goin' to let us git back, without a fight fur the hosses. We got to git to the place whar we left aour own hosses, and take these along with us, and that's goin' to be a hard task. I'm going to divide the boys into two parties. One, with you, will take the back track to the ranches, as quick as ye kin, and the rest, with me will cover the retreat, as well as we kin. There ain't no time to lose. Chillern and all has to be kerried back, and if we stay hyar, it's my opinion we're going to git wiped aout. So git the ladies up at once."

The women, just saved from a fearful fate, heard the new peril that awaited them, and shuddered at the thought of new fatigue and danger, but Diana Field roused herself and said, before the men who stood round her, silent and attentive:

"Girls, you hear what Mr. Kimble says. We have got to return home, as soon as we can. It will be hard work, but remember that we are going home, and not coming from it. Are you all ready?"

They all said "yes," with an effort at enthusiasm, and the sheriff nodded, as if well pleased.

"That's your way to talk, ladies," he said cheerfully. "The boys will take keer of ye, and Mr. Field will be along. Ye'll have to do some riding to-night, before the day comes, but after that it won't be so hard, and the way back won't seem half so long as the way here did. Naow, I don't want to hurry ye, but the sooner you're off, the better it will be fur all of us."

And without waiting for any more, and trusting to Tom Field to get the women into the proper place, the stalwart sheriff went out, and was heard among the men, getting ready for a stubborn defense of the position, which he expected to be attacked before morning.

Tom hurried the ladies out and across the plain of the corral to the side of the ravine, where they were let down by the aid of the long lariats of the cowboys, so that they reached the horse-guard in safety.

They were placed on horses, the children taken in the arms of men who knew them, and the rest formed to protect the precious freight, as they marched back to the camp, where the ponies had been left for safety.

Tom Field went along with them as leader of the escort, and as soon as they reached the camp he took the horses that were left, and continued the march toward home, as fast as they could ride in the moonlight, till the first streaks of dawn appeared in the east, when he went into camp in a *motte*, where he knew that he could defy three or four times his numbers to dislodge him, if they attacked on horseback.

There he rested his ponies, and fed them the last grain that was in the bags, while he and his people ate their breakfast; after which they set out for home, once more, at the same rapid pace, the children asleep in the sturdy arms of the rude cowboys, the women nodding in their saddles from fatigue, but all pressing on at the trot, till they thought they were safe from the pursuit of the enemy.

The cowboys had traversed the same distance, with fresh horses, in twelve hours; but the ponies were not so fresh, now, as when they had started, and the women could not support the fatigue of riding at the tremendous pace at which their rescuers had come.

It was getting near sunset when they came to the old fence line of the cattle company, and Tom, seeing that the women could not possibly support any more fatigue, that day, went into camp in another *motte*, and sent forward one of the cowboys to the ranch, to bring up a strong force to help, in case the enemy should attack them during the night.

No fires were built, and the food that was hastily swallowed was hardly needed, for the great want of all the party was sleep, after the ride they had had; the men having had two days of it, steady, almost without rest, while the women and children were worn out.

The watch was set; Tom himself walked a beat till nearly midnight; when the sound of horse-hoofs, on the prairie, roused him and he got his men up, ready to repel any assault.

But as the sounds got nearer, and the forms of men were visible in the moonlight, the features of the friends of the fugitives were discernible; and within ten minutes after they were spied, they were in camp, ready to defy

any assault made by less than a regiment, for there were sixty or seventy men in the new party, from Satanstown and the ranches, all burning to revenge the capture of the ladies and the raid on the stock, which last is a Texan's weak point.

From that time till daylight, Tom Field knew no more; for, as soon as the strain was off him, he sunk under the necessity of rest, and slept soundly, till the dawn shone in his eyes.

When the light awakened him he sprang up, half-asleep still; for there was a great disturbance in the camp, and the men were shouting to each other and running to their horses.

Refreshed by the sleep, he rose and joined them to see, far out in the prairie, the dark forms of horsemen coming at a rapid pace from the north—the quarter whence any foes that were expected would come.

The cowboys who had come from the ranches to the rescue the previous night, were on their horses, dashing out to inspect the new-comers, who had not been recognized, and Tom saw the flashes of the rifles beginning almost as soon as they came within shooting distance.

It was the enemy come again in numbers greater than he had deemed possible, for there were at least a hundred horsemen in the approaching party, coming at a gallop as if they meant business.

What their object could be, Tom could hardly conjecture, for it seemed incredible that they could contemplate a serious attack on the forces of the whole county; but he remembered that he was still twenty miles from Satanstown, and that the prairie round him, though within the technical limits of a county of the State of Texas, was, to all practical purposes, as wild as it had been when the Indians roved over it, in pursuit of the buffalo. The buffalo had gone and the cattle had taken their place, but the country was as thinly settled as ever, outside of the Blue Fork ranches.

With these thoughts in his head, and seeing the rapid advance of the enemy, he roused the women and children in haste, and placed them on horses, with which he set out on the road to Satanstown at a fast trot, leaving the cowboys to cover the retreat.

The women were pale and frightened at the idea of more peril, and the sound of the shots in the rear told them that a hot fight was going on; but they stuck to their saddles, and rode on as fast as they could, while two of the cowboys kept the children in their arms and galloped ahead of the rest.

Tom Field was very loth to leave his friends in the lurch, the more so as they had no leader on whom they could depend like himself. The sheriff had taken all the ranchers with him, to defend the natural corral, and bring back the herd of stolen ponies, so that there had been no one but Tom to depend on, to take the children and women back.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEW RAID.

Tom had the good point of always sticking to his business, whatever it was, and it stood him in good stead now, for he kept his course straight toward Satanstown, with his precious charges, and before very long, the sounds of the conflict faded away behind him, so that he felt sure that the enemy were not driving the cowboys, fast enough to make any cause for immediate uneasiness.

In an hour from the time they started, he saw the distant tower of the company's log-house, which was a conspicuous object in the landscape at any time, and knew that he had about six miles more to go.

He turned in his saddle to the ladies, who were riding behind him, and called out to them, encouragingly:

"See there, girls! there's the log-house, and Helen Kimble, ready to receive you all. Once there, we can defy all the men they choose to bring against us, short of artillery. Come along! you have not far to go, now."

Then he slackened the pace for a little, to give the horses a chance to breathe, and looked behind him, when he was shocked to perceive that the line of dots which represented the distant cowboys and their foes, was coming nearer and nearer every moment, at a speed that told of a stampede among the cowboys and a rapid pursuit by the enemy.

They were still at least five miles off, but the rate at which they were coming on showed that they had hopes of catching the fugitives, and the six miles yet left to cover would give them a chance, if the ladies did not make better time.

No sooner had he ascertained this beyond a doubt, than he urged his charges to greater speed, and found no necessity of saying much.

The sights and sounds behind them: the puffs of white smoke and the distant cracks of firearms told them, better than words, what was going on, and they had no fancy to get taken a second time.

Six miles are soon covered at a gallop, and there was no longer any object in sparing the ponies, so they were urged to the utmost.

Inside of half an hour from the time when they saw that the cowboys were being driven

in, the exhausted women rode up to the log-house, and Helen Kimble came rushing out in haste, to welcome them.

But Tom saw that the danger was still too great to allow any time to be waste in feminine raptures or fainting-fits, so he asked:

"Helen, where are all the men?"

"All gone out to help you, of course," she answered, startled at his anxious tone. "Why, what's the matter?"

"The matter is that you must defend the house as well as you can, while I go back to get the men out," he answered hurriedly. "Shut the windows, and bar them, get all the place secure; and the rifles, that are in the store-room, out by the loop-holes. Leave only one place for us to get in, for the men are being driven back. I will go and bring them in, the best way I know how; and, once in here, we can defy them; but even this house cannot be defended by one man and a lot of girls. Will you do what I ask?"

Her tone was as firm as in the days when she had been recognized as the heroine of the county, as she replied:

"All right, Tom. You do your duty and I will do mine. Good luck to you."

Then he wheeled his horse, calling out:

"Take care of Di, and the children."

With that he was gone. His wife shrieked after him, but he heeded her not, and went off into the fight, which was coming nearer, every moment.

As he cleared the precincts of the log-house, he saw the cowboys, about a mile off, coming for the place in a wild, huddled bunch as if completely panic-stricken, while their foes were following, shooting, almost without resistance.

And he had to go in there and check the panic, if he could. He knew that the men were dispirited by his absence, and trusted to the effect of his sudden appearance to give them heart, so he dashed forward as fast as he could, and, as soon as he got within range of the enemy, began to fire, cantering to and fro, at a pace that allowed a steady use of his piece, and had the satisfaction of dropping a man at every shot of his repeater, for the first six shots.

And the best point of his shooting was that it checked the pursuit at once, and gave the cowboys, who had been running for their lives, heart enough to rally from the panic, and turn their horses to fight again.

There had not been so much loss as he had expected, for the men who had come to help him, the night before, were nearly all there.

More than sixty mounted men were still at his disposal, but his enemies were at least a hundred in number, as he saw, now that they were fully revealed on the open prairie.

They were led by a tall man, in the rich dress of a Mexican ranchero, in whom he could not at that distance recognize the English captain whom he suspected of being the ringleader.

They were all dressed in the Mexican style, and appeared to be well armed and mounted, as far as he could see.

The leader seemed to understand his business too, for he was able to check the panic which followed the sudden and unlooked-for attack of Top Notch Tom, whose dashing style of firing was recognized by his foes at once.

Then the race became a running fight, and the cowboys, under Tom's direction, made a rapid retreat, firing as they went, not attempting to hold the enemy, but making him earn every foot of ground.

The horses of both parties were about evenly tired. The enemy had come a great way, but the cowboys had done too much dashing to and fro, in the early part of the fight, and had tired out their ponies.

Tom set them the example of slow riding at a canter, so as to disturb the aim as little as possible, and in this manner they got to the log-house, and the problem became how to retire the men inside, without the enemy following them, pell-mell.

That the foe perceived his advantage was plain, by a determined charge, made at the instant the foremost horseman turned his horse to gallop up to the house, as Tom had ordered.

But the young rancher had not learned his trade of prairie fighting from Wild Cat in vain, and he made such a desperate resistance with half of his men, covering the retreat of the other half, that they checked the charge of the enemy, and gave the others time to get into the house. Then Tom gave the signal and turned to run for his life, while the foe gave a wild yell and came tearing after.

Then came the rattle of a volley from the upper loop-holes of the fortified house, and the incessant roll showed that the men who had got in were using the spare pieces, and doing the work they had been ordered in fine style.

That volley checked the rush at once, for there is a vast difference between shots fired from a steady rest, and those fired from a saddle, to say nothing of the difference in exposure.

There were less than twenty men in the house, at the upper loop-holes, and the enemy were at least a hundred in number; but the fire of the twenty sent at least a dozen men from their saddles at the first volley, and the rest

turned tail and fled with a suddenness that was ludicrous.

Then Tom Field found that he had fifty-seven men left whom he could depend on—not enough to drive the enemy, but quite sufficient to make the log-house impregnable to assault at present.

He left the twenty men, who had first manned the defenses of the house, at their posts, and the rest he mustered behind the place on horseback, so as to keep them out of the fire, but ready to sally out at need.

Then he told them to keep together, and go round the house if the enemy did so, with the object of keeping at all times a mounted force ready to pursue as soon as the robbers should give up the fight. He could not think it possible that they could be bold enough to think of making a fresh attack in broad daylight within five miles of the town.

But as soon as he had arranged his defense, he saw that the purpose of the enemy was even more audacious than he had at first supposed.

The volley had driven them back in some confusion, but as soon as he rode out to view them, he saw that they were dismounting their men in regular cavalry style at a few hundred yards from the house, and forming a long skirmish-line in a semi-circle, which was coming toward the place, firing rapidly at everything that was exposed.

The men were creeping through the grass, so as to show as little of their bodies as they could, and already they had got in sight of the mounted cowboys that had been sheltered behind the house, for they were spreading further and further round it every minute, pouring in a cross fire that was very annoying.

There was no shelter for the horses of the cowboys by the house, while the stable was some way off, and could not hold them all.

They were dropping, one by one, beneath the fire; and Tom, whose experience of warfare was altogether in the Indian style, which recognizes no distinction between the warrior and his horse, was puzzled what to do. The robbers were making a new style of fighting, with which he was totally unacquainted, and under which he knew his men must soon succumb if something were not done.

The stealthy line of men on foot was creeping forward, step by step, and the shots were whizzing in among the horses by the house, threatening to start a stampede, which would be difficult to restrain.

While he was thinking what to do his horse was shot under him, the bullet nearly going through his own leg in the operation, and, as it fell, one of his men called out:

"Cap, this won't do; they'll cut us to pieces this way. We've got to try 'em afoot, or we'll git wiped out."

Tom knew the man, whose nickname was "Soger Jake" because he had at one time been in the United States service, and was always talking about "the time when he fit in the war."

But Soger Jake's advice was good for all that, and as soon as Tom saw that the enemy were getting the best of his men, he called out:

"Get off your horses, boys, and run out to defend the house."

The men, only too glad to escape from the shots which they had hitherto been unable to resist or repel, jumped off their animals, letting them run at large, Indian style, and ran out on a line to repel the advance of the foe.

Then the fight became more equal, and the shots from the loopholes of the house restored the balance, which was inclining the other way before.

Tom was firing away at the puffs of smoke in the best style he knew how, and thinking that he would soon be able to beat off the foe, when the firing in front became unusually rapid, and the next moment, with a wild yell, down came a rush of mounted men of the enemy, who made a dash for the side of the house where the horses had crowded for shelter, and started a real stampede, which carried them off in less than ten seconds, before the cowboys could make out the object of the apparently senseless dash.

Then Top Notch Tom recognized the fact for the first time that he had opposed to him a master in the art of partisan warfare on horseback, for his men were reduced in a moment from the role of those who might become aggressors at any moment to that of men who had to wait on their enemies.

The firing became fainter from the moment that the ponies had been carried off, and the cowboys realized that they had met an enemy who understood his business, for they saw a large party of mounted men going off at a gallop in the direction of the ranch of "Colonel" Callahan, and suspected their object at once. It was to carry off more stock while the cowboys were helpless.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHERIFF'S SCOUT.

In the mean time we must return to Hank, the Nailer, Sheriff of Satanta county, whom we left at the great natural corral up by the Indian Territory.

The task of the bold sheriff was even harder than that of Tom Field, inasmuch as he had to hold a position with a small force and a huge herd of ponies to guard, without the privilege of escaping, as Tom had.

The news brought by Wild Cat was as follows:

The Indian had been skulking about the *motte* after the departure of Top Notch Tom, and had discovered a second party of robbers, all sound asleep, over whom he had nearly stumbled in the darkness of the *motte*, and whose carelessness on watch had been his only salvation from discovery.

These men had been found in a position that showed that the robbers expected to be attacked on the north side, in the same way that Old Cross-Eye had been attacked in times past by the gang of thieves headed by Tomlinson.

Wild Cat, after he had located them, waited patiently for the arrival of Top Notch Tom with the rest of the attacking party, which had come up the line of the ravine, and while he was watching, one of the men on guard at the ambush woke up and began to stamp round and waken up the rest, in a way that showed he had been doing something he was afraid to be caught at.

He had roused his companions, and they had begun to talk, with a view of keeping each other awake, while the Indian had listened attentively to all that was said.

Wild Cat, as we have intimated elsewhere, understood a great deal more English than he was willing to admit at most times, from pride in his own tongue and the consciousness that he talked broken English; but when it suited his purpose he could make himself understood as well as understand others.

Listening intently, he found from the conversation of the men, that they expected to be followed, but had no idea that their foes would be able to get up before the next day at noon, and therefore were inclined to be jocose over the great success that had marked their raid so far.

It further appeared that they were in league with a number of half-breeds in the territory, the offshoots from the great confederacy of the tribes, most of them outcasts from their bands, and certain Mexicans, headed by a man whom Wild Cat thought to be nicknamed "Buena Vista Miguel," for they spoke of him frequently in their slangy talk.

The intention of the thieves was to make a series of raids on the outlying counties of the State, beginning with Satanta, where they had but little resistance to fear to the numbers they were able to control, and it was their intention to sweep off the stock, by herds at a time, and dispose of them, partly in the territory, and partly in the State of Kansas, as they could best find a market.

The only thing Wild Cat had been unable to find out was the real name of the leader, and the number of men in the gang. Their headquarters were somewhere near the corral, for they frequently spoke of going there for help, if the cowboys pursued them in numbers sufficient to put them in danger of losing the stock they had stolen.

Wild Cat thought that the friends they depended on might be those of his own tribe, but that idea was soon dispelled when he heard them talking Spanish and English, and saw that there was not an Indian in the party.

He had tracked the sign of Fawn Foot, one of the young men of his tribe, who had been just going on the war-path when the tribe was sent into the Territory and given over to the ways of peace. He had known of Fawn Foot as being exceedingly ambitious of becoming a warrior, without the means of gratifying his desire, and wondered what had become of him, when the conversation of the robbers revealed the cause of Fawn Foot's absence.

As the old Indian had divined from the tracks and their interpretation Fawn Foot had been sent off with the cattle, which were the most difficult part of the booty to dispose of, on account of their brands and the slowness with which they traveled.

He was to guide them, with their escort, through the recesses of the Staked Plains, by secret ways that were known to none but the men of his tribe, where water was to be found, and where no one would have dreamed that cattle could have been taken without perishing of hunger, so that they might be taken into another State altogether, where they would not be suspected as having come from Texas, and disposed of to some man whom they called "Slippery Joe."

Thus much had Wild Cat heard when the sound of the first yell and shots of the attacking party of cowboys made themselves audible and produced something very like a panic on the men in the ambush, who had expected fighting on the opposite side, if at all.

In their first fright, one of them had called out to the rest to "go to the chief, and tell him there was need of all the men."

Then one of the men jumped on his pony and rode off, full speed, in the northwest direction, in which Wild Cat knew that the tribe of the Senecas had their reservations, while the noise on the other side, became so tremendous

that he saw the time for action was nearly come.

Presently the robbers came rushing through the bushes, hotly pursued by the cowboys, and the men in the ambush rose from their hiding-place, pouring in their fire with deadly effect, till the equally unexpected rising of the Indian behind with his Winchester rifle at his shoulder, and his aim, taken with cool precision before they knew what was happening, turned the scale once more, and the cowboys were triumphant as we have already seen.

But the men whom they had driven off were sure to come back, according to the Indian's story, and the Sheriff of Satanta county was busy, the rest of the night, after he had got the women safe out of the way, in making preparations to receive his unbidden, and decidedly unwelcome guests.

That there would be an attack before morning he had no doubt, and the ponies were in no condition to make a forced march yet, after what they had gone through to get them into the corral. As to getting out of it, there need to be no hurry about that yet, for the place was susceptible of defense, and the only quarter whence an assault could be made by a successful surprise was that of the ravine, which the robbers would probably not think of at all.

If they attempted to climb up there, save by the same surprise that had already been successful in dislodging their own party, it would be comparatively easy to repulse them, by means of rocks and stones, rolled down on their heads. In fact, an open assault on that side would be an impossibility, so that the simple precaution of setting a sentry there, would be sufficient to make things safe.

As for an attack on the other side, the men at the command of the sheriff were not quite fifty, now that the escort for the women had come out of them, but they would be capable of holding the *motte* of wood in front of them, against ten times their number, advancing in the open prairie.

The first thing after the departure of the girls was to put the wood into a position of respectable defense, and this was done with the more ease that the task had been partially performed, years before, by Old Cross-Eye, who had planted trees close together, and woven wattles between them, so as to make part of the wood quite impenetrable, save to the hatchet.

A very little work made the rest quite impracticable to any assault on horseback, and the marshal told his men that they could rest, as soon as the watch was set, which was not long doing.

Then Hank, with his friends the ranchers, who had come with him, separated themselves from the cowboys, and held a consultation as to the best course to pursue under the circumstances. It was regarded as a certainty that the men, from whom they had just recovered part of their property, would try all they could to get the horses away from them, if they tried to drive such a large herd home together, through the intervening prairie.

It would take two or three days, besides, to put these ponies into condition sufficient to stand the homeward march, and, in the mean time, they were safe where they were.

The ranchers concluded, at last, that the best thing they could do was to stay where they were and defend the corral, where Tom and Old Cross-Eye had lived so long. It was pretty sure that the robbers would never use it again, now that they had found it was no longer a safe place to hide plunder, so that they were the less likely to be molested.

This settled, the night passed quietly, and in the morning the marshal went out alone to inspect the condition of the stock and make a reconnaissance round the neighborhood, to find if there were any traces of the enemy.

He went outside the timber, and stumbled first on the body of the man whom Wild Cat had killed the night before, who lay, stark and stiff, in the sunlight, with his scalp stripped from his head.

Hank inspected him closely and recognized in him a noted desperado of the name of "Poker Jim," who had once been a great ruffler at Satanstown, and had been driven from the county with the rest, at the time of the last fight with the company, about the fence-cutting.

The man was dressed in the rich Mexican dandy rig that the cowboy in funds affects, for vanity principally, and he had been a handsome fellow in his life. But the expression of his face, drawn with the intense pain that generally marks wounds of the heart, was so ghastly that even Hank, the Nailer, who had become hardened to the sight of dead men, shuddered slightly, as he looked at the blue and distorted visage, and muttered to himself:

"Pore Jim!"

The words of pity on his lip, his attention was momentarily diverted from what was going on around him, when the sharp report of a rifle, with the whistle of a bullet that cut into his long hair, as it hung down his back, and grazed the neck, reminded him by the sharp sting, that his enemies were alive all round him yet.

Glancing quickly up, as soon as the first stunning sensation had passed away, he saw the head and shoulders of a man coming over the swell beyond, to the northwest, at a gallop, the rising and falling of the figure showing that there was a horse below it, on the other side of the ridge.

As he saw this, the man raised his rifle a second time, and fired at Hank, with a quick snap-shot, that came nearly as close as the first, and showed the veteran marksman that he had to do with a fancy shot.

To bring up his own rifle, from where it lay on the pommel of his saddle, and level it, was the work of a moment, and the next, he fired, and had the pleasure of seeing the man dodge and bow low, in salute to the ball, his hat coming off in the action.

Then the rider, without pausing, came dashing over the top of the crest, with a courage that showed him to be no mean antagonist, and the marshal saw that he was a very handsome fellow, in the same Mexican rig that all the bandits affected, with any quantity of gold lace about him.

He came down at a tearing gallop, with his rifle in one hand, and passed to the left of the marksman, with a recklessness that savored of foolhardiness, firing shot after shot at close range, Hank returning the shots, but neither, in the speed of the horses, managing to give a disabling wound, though Hank was hit more than once, and the other man the same.

Then the ranger threw aside his empty rifle, and called out:

"*Al cuchillo! Al cuchillo, amigo!*"

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE CORRAL.

HANK, the Nailer was enough of a rough-and-ready Spanish scholar, to know that the words of the stranger were a challenge to a knife-fight, to refuse which, a Mexican considers a sign of cowardice.

The man before him was a Mexican or Spaniard in face and figure, with a dark beauty that would have captivated any ordinary young lady. He sat in his saddle with a lazy grace that showed he was used to it from childhood.

His dark, glowing eyes were like stars for brilliancy, and the perfect contour of his face was charming. He wore a dark, downy mustache, that just shaded his upper lip, and his long, curling hair was black as jet, shining like silk in the sun. In fact, he was such a handsome fellow that Hank had not the heart to shoot to kill him, from the first, as he might have done, with his skill; and he had only tried to cripple him, with the result of missing.

For the first time in his life, he had come across a "Greaser" who excited his admiration, and behaved as if he were a brave fellow.

To refuse the challenge would have been disgraceful, and he threw his rifle to his knees, and drew his long knife, imitating the action of the stranger, who came swooping down on him at once, like a hawk on the wing.

He rode a very beautiful horse of the spotted kind that Texans call "paint bronchos," and that Mexicans delight in, above all others.

The animal seemed to be in perfect training; for the rider had dropped the reins on its neck and was guiding the animal solely by the pressure of the legs and spurs, swaying to and fro to divert Hank's attention, and waving the knife as he came while his left hand was busy wrapping the folds of a gay purple *manga* or cloak, round it, by successive waves, as he came, so as to make a buckler of the thick folds.

But Hank the Nailer would never have been a candidate for Sheriff of Satanta county, had he not been an expert in all kinds of fighting, practiced by Greasers and white men.

He was used to the pistol-fight, where no defense was possible, except that of shooting before the other man; but when it came to knives, there was a chance to ward blows, and he had all that at his fingers' end.

The young Mexican might be a good hand at it; but Hank the Nailer was a "past master" at the game, and did not even put his horse to speed, to circle round the other, as he awaited the attack.

The Mexican came down with a rush, just grazing Hank's pony, as he came, and made a slash at the tall sheriff, that would have divided the cords of his arm had it reached the mark.

But Hank met it with his own knife in a parry, and gave a swift, subtle turn to the wrist as he did so, that nearly knocked the knife out of the Mexican's hand. Then they were parted, and the Mexican, with a wrench of the bridle, threw his horse on its haunches, wheeled round, and threw his knife, with a vindictive "*Carajo!*" straight at the heart of the sheriff.

So quickly was the cast performed, that the marshal had not time to parry, and had to leap half out of his saddle to evade the flying weapon. Then the other, with a loud laugh, that had a musical sound in spite of the situation, put spurs to his pony and dashed past Hank again at full speed, waving his buckled arm as he passed, as much as to defy the other to stab through the folds of the *manga*.

* "To the knife! To the knife, my friend!"

But Hank was too much occupied in staring at something in the figure of the other to make the effort that might have ended the battle.

He saw the stranger throw himself over the side of the horse to pick up the knife from the prairie, and then turn to repeat the throw. Suddenly Hank put his hand to his belt, and drew a pistol, which he presented at the other, crying:

"That's enough, young feller. Naow, do you want to git wiped aout, or don't ye? I've fooled with ye long enough."

The reply was a furious cast of the knife, which passed Hank's head and cut the brim of his hat, knocking it off.

And yet the sheriff forbore to fire. Why he did so he could not tell, but there was something in the bold stand of the stranger that excited his sympathy. He looked so handsome and gallant, and showed so little fear.

But Hank had not much time to deliberate, for at that very moment he caught sight of more figures coming over the hill behind the Mexican, and knew that he would have to fight his way back to the shelter of the wood.

The stranger heard the patter of hoofs, and raised a shrill yell while he dashed off, swerving from side to side to confuse Hank's aim, and taking up his lasso as he went.

And still the sheriff did not fire. On the contrary, he wheeled his horse and galloped off toward the wood, a wild yell of triumph following him as he went, till he had reached the front of his own position, when he halted, and saw the forms of his men among the trees, watching the enemy, ready to open fire, should they chase Hank into the cover.

But this they did not do.

On the contrary, the strange young cavalier cantered to and fro at the top of the hill, waving his lasso, and calling out all sorts of Spanish abuse after Hank, stigmatizing him as a coward, and daring him to come on again, while the other men, who had now come up, to the number of about five or six, halted and yelled in concert, till they were scattered by a volley from the cowboys in the wood, who were angered at the taunts sent at them.

The volley did no harm, but it scattered the robbers, who vanished behind the ridge, and the sheriff rode into the corral and tied his horse to a tree, while the men were sent to line the edge of the wood, and the ravine-guards were warned to exercise all the vigilance they could.

From that time forth, the attitude of the defenders of the corral was one of passive expectancy, for they had not force sufficient to go forth and attack the enemy, though Punch Burleson, whose fiery soul disdained inaction, was eager to be allowed to do it, "just for once."

But the prudent sheriff would not by any means permit this, for he knew that it was just what the enemy wished, or he would have come down to attack the cowboys.

The force on the top of the hill was increasing all the time, and before an hour had passed they had counted more than a hundred horsemen, who rode tauntingly past, in a long file, at the summit of the ridge, as if to display their force, and made dashes, in Indian style, down by the entrance to the path that led to the corral, trying to draw the fire of the cowboys and find out where they were located.

But the sheriff had given strict orders that no one should fire till he did, and the enemy would not come into such close range as should give an opportunity for a point-blank shot.

They kept at three or four hundred yards from the edge of the *motte*, rode at a fast pace with a great deal of noise, tempered with prudence withal; for they never gave a chance to the cowboys to get a square shot at a group standing still.

This sort of thing lasted till about noon, when there was a change.

A large party of men came out into full view and rode away past the corral, taking the circuit that led toward Satanstown, their horses packed for a journey, their leader, a man in whom Hank, by the aid of a strong field-glass, lent him by Top Notch Tom, before the latter went off, recognized the face and figure of the English captain,* who had given him so much trouble, in days gone by, when the other had been manager of the cattle-company.

Berkeley was changed in appearance, but the sheriff knew him by his air and the way he sat his horse.

His face was covered with a beard that had been dyed black, but the lightness of the eyes under the broad Mexican sombrero revealed the Anglo-Saxon race, and Hank remarked:

"That's the villain at last. I spared him before, but if I git a squar' chance at him, this lick, I'll shoot to kill, you kin bet, boys."

The party, however, kept carefully out of rifle-range, and rode away in full view, so that there was no doubt of the intention of the leader to let them know where he was going.

The young Mexican, who had made such a brilliant skirmish with the redoubted sheriff that morning, seemed to be left in command of

the rest of the robbers, for he could be seen on the spotted pony, giving directions to the remainder of the men, as the other party departed.

When the last of the distant horsemen had disappeared behind the horizon, there remained about fifty men of the robbers, and the strength of their numbers surprised the sheriff.

He stood by the edge of the *motte* watching, Punch Burleson and Limpy Balstrop by his side, and remarked soberly:

"Boys, there's a heap of them men. I'm afeard we'll need all the *posse* we kin raise in the caounty, and more, too, to wipe 'em aout. Things is gittin' serious."

Hank, among his comrades, was as careless of the restraints of grammar as any of them, though he could speak correctly on occasion.

Punch pulled his beard thoughtfully.

"There's a bull grist of 'em, ain't there? It's my idee that the fellers who went off is goin' to give a heap of trouble at home."

"You're right," said Limpy sententiously. "I'm thinkin' that, mebbe, I won't be the only one that gits his ranch sweep, next time, boys."

And there was an air of something very like grim satisfaction on Limpy's face as he spoke, for he realized that he had so far been the only loser, and the fact was disagreeable to think of.

Deaf Smith, who had been standing by, looking at the distant robbers without hearing anything that was said, here put in:

"Gentlemen, do you know what I think? Those fellers don't want to fight us; they've had enough of that. They want to keep us hyar while the rest of 'em sweeps the ranches. And they're a-goin' to do it if we don't look smart."

Then Hank broke up the conference by saying:

"Boys, it takes two to make a bargain. We've got to do suthin' or git fooled by the Greasers, and that's what no Texas man will stand. 'I'll tell ye what I propose to do later. In the mean time, the more rest we give the ponies the better it will be when we come to fight aour way aout of this. I don't propose to stay hyar no longer'n the ponies want rest. I'm Sheriff of Satansta caounty, and the caounty is in danger. If you're game to foller me, we'll make it lively for those ducks on the hill yonder as soon as the moon rises."

Colonel Callahan laughed, as he said: "With all the pleasure in life, me boy. It's not the Callahan that'll go back on a foight any day in the week."

Then they went back to their place in the *motte*, and the rest of the day was passed in seeing that the ponies were kept undisturbed.

The animals had already recovered a great portion of their spirits, and showed it by playing with each other.

Hank went all over the ground and tried to find a place where he could get them down the ravine. He knew that once headed for their old feeding-ground on the Blue Fork they would be likely to run their best, and all the efforts of the robbers to head them off would be useless. But it was impossible to get them out of the corral by the single narrow path that was the natural exit as long as that was guarded by the enemy. Any attempt to do it would only result in their being driven back, and in the confusion the robbers would have a fair opportunity to storm the place without loss.

Thinking over all this, he went to the edge of the ravine and inspected it closely.

CHAPTER XIII.

RUNNING AWAY.

THE sides of the ravine were steep and quite impracticable to horses, for the most part of its length, where it bordered the corral; but the sheriff knew that it ran on into the plain, at a mile or so outside, and he had an idea that a path might be made in that direction by the use of such men as he had.

On the side toward the robbers he did not think it prudent to venture, for fear of attracting their attention; but on the other end of the corral, he explored long and carefully.

At last, at the very end of the corral, he saw a sort of path, which had been used in former times, and was barely practicable for ponies in single file.

Had Tom been there with him, he could have told him that, on one occasion, he had lost a herd of Mavericks by that very path, which had since been blocked up by a fence of bushes so that it was hidden from sight.

The discovery filled Hank with satisfaction, and he sent for the men at once to remove the obstructions and open the path.

Willing hands made light work, and before an hour had passed the ponies were beginning to go down the path, one by one, silently, and without any effort to hurry on the part of the drivers, a few men ahead to guide them when they should reach the plain.

By the time the sun had set most of the herd had entered the path, and the question remained how to withdraw the men on guard at the edge of the *motte* without letting the enemy know.

Fires were lighted so that the robbers could see them, and a number of men kept circulating round them, firing occasional shots in

the direction of the robbers to provoke a fight, but without eliciting any response save ironical yells when the shots did not reach them.

At last the news came from the ravine that the last of the ponies had gone down, and then Hank gave orders to withdraw the men, one by one, and take the trail of the herd.

He himself, with Punch, Limpy, the colonel and Deaf Smith, remained to cover the retreat, their rifles loaded, till the signal agreed on came pealing through the air in the shape of a whistle, that the men were safe on the home trail and no enemy in sight.

Then Hank said quietly:

"Naow, Limpy, you and Smith go. Punch and me, we kin foller when you're safe."

Limpy turned his horse with a silent gesture to Smith, and the two rode off, leaving the Sheriff of Satansta and a single follower to face the enemy, whom they knew to number at least fifty men.

It was a trying time, and even Hank, with all his dauntless courage saw it, and became silent as he sat on his horse, watching.

The forms of the enemy could be seen by their fires, for they too had lighted them, and as the minutes passed on, there seemed to be a movement going on among them.

Hank and his companion withdrew out of the light of the fire, and took their position in the entrance of the path, where they could defy the rush that they expected was coming.

Then came a single shot from the top of the hill, and the next moment down came the robbers in a grand charge, as if they had expected to storm the woods.

Hank threw up his rifle to his shoulder, and said to Punch:

"Naow then no missin', remember. If ye hain't got a bead drawn, *don't fire*."

Punch nodded, and the enemy came on, full speed, rushing from side to side to confuse the aim of the defenders.

The perfect silence that met them, however, had its effect, for they slackened their pace, after the first opening of the charge, and got down into a trot, like the Mexican lancers at the battle of Buena Vista, awed, in spite of themselves, by their own imaginations.

This idea ended in bringing them to a halt, at less than a hundred yards from the wood, in a huddled bunch, when Hank and Punch opened their fire, with a rapidity that was amazing, and with fatal result to several men, who were seen to drop from their saddles.

Then the panic began when a brilliant figure dashed out into the light of the fires, and Hank recognized the dandy Mexican, who had faced him that morning. A wild confusion of cries, and Hank said to Punch:

"Naow's aour time, boy. They won't find nobody hyar and it will take them time to find the way. Run fur your life, till ye git to the gap."

Suiting the action to the word, he turned his horse and galloped down the narrow path into the corral, while the confusion was greatest in the ranks of the enemy.

A few bounds, and they were in the open corral galloping to the ravine and the gap.

Once there, they did not halt, but went down it as fast as they dared.

The sure-footed ponies, left to themselves, made their way down without difficulty, and as Hank descended, he cast a backward glance at the corral, and saw that it was yet empty, while the rattle of volleys showed that the robbers were firing into the bushes.

He reached the bottom in safety, and beheld the figure of Wild Cat waiting for him.

The Indian asked him anxiously:

"Man see you? Ha!"

Hank shook his head and replied:

"The quicker we git aout of this, the better, Wild Cat. They won't be long in finding the way."

Wild Cat nodded and turned his pony, when they rode off into the ravine, till it emerged into the prairie, and the distant spots that told of the herd of ponies were descried in the moonlight, making the best of their way toward the south.

At the mouth of the ravine, the Indian halted, and said to Hank, in his broken English:

"Stop here. Man come up soon; git him in hole. Kill many; ha?"

The sheriff nodded.

"Pretty saound on the fight; ain't he?" he said to Punch, and the rancher responded:

"Kinder. Who'd ha' thought we'd be fightin' on the same side as an Injun; hey, Hank?"

Then they tied their horses together by the ends of the bridles, head and tails, so that they could not be easily stampeded, but so that the fastenings could be loosed quickly, and lay down by the edge of the ravine, in an old buffalo-wallow, where they were completely sheltered from observation.

Wild Cat kept glancing round the horizon, all the time, as if apprehensive of an attack from another quarter, but when Hank asked him what he feared, his answer was:

"See hosses go. No want stampede yet. Hist!"

Then he turned his head on one side, and listened intently, saying:

* See "Old Cross-Eye," and "Top Notch Tom."

"Men hunting path. Soon come now."

They waited and heard, from the vicinity of the corral, the sound of shots, when Wild Cat laughed and observed:

"Yellow man heap fool! Fire into woods to find nobody."

Presently they heard the sound of horses' feet in the ravine, and the three men brought their rifles to their shoulders and gazed down the narrow pathway.

Presently the head of a horse came into view, followed by another and another, till at least a dozen came galloping on, evidently in haste, and having no idea of the ambush that lay in wait for them in the buffalo-wallow.

As soon as they were fairly within range, three rifles spoke simultaneously, and the three men in advance dropped from their horses together.

Hank turned to Wild Cat, to say, approvingly:

"Good shot, Wild Cat! I know Punch kin shoot, but you're the fu'st Injun I ever seen could make a fu'st-class shot in the moonlight."

As he spoke he was reversing the lever of his rifle, and the next moment he fired again into the huddled group of men, who had halted in dismay at the deadly volley.

The three rifles pealed a second time, and three more men rolled from their horses, while the rest turned and fled, the whole ravine full of the noise and confusion that attested the panic that was spread behind.

Then came a noise of yelling, and a second charge came tearing up the ravine, with a dash that showed some one to be at the head who feared nothing.

This time there were at least twenty men in the bunch that dashed up, and the dandy Mexican was at the head of them, swinging his rifle and yelling loudly.

A third time the rifles spoke, and the fire became rapid and deadly; but the dandy Mexican seemed to bear a charmed life, for he got up to the very edge of the buffalo-wallow, when Punch shot his horse through the breast, and the Indian leaped up to get his scalp, as the rider lay under the animal.

But the dandy Mexican was hardly down when he was up again, and running away like an antelope, while Hank cried:

"Don't shoot him, boys! Game ain't so plenty ye want to wipe it out. That boy's a trump!"

And the dandy Mexican got off scathless, to the shelter of the ravine, though the charge was checked, and the robbers did not try it again.

Then followed a silence that lasted near an hour, during which the ponies in the distance went on, till they could no longer be seen even by the Indian, and Wild Cat, with an uneasy glance to the prairie, said to Hank:

"Time to go. Yellow man go round."

Hank nodded his head.

"Guess ye're about right, Injun. If they ketch us out on the preerie, they kin best us yet."

So they loosened their horses silently, and rode quietly away at a foot-pace, one by one, till they had gotten about a quarter of a mile from the wallow, when they heard a yell behind.

Wild Cat raised his whip and responded by another yell, and away they sailed in the moonlight on the trail of the ponies going on the home track at last.

Hank looked back as he rode, and saw that the robbers had come out of the ravine at last, and were coming in hot pursuit, but there were only about ten or a dozen of them, and the dandy Mexican was not at their head.

As soon as he ascertained this, he slackened his pace and turned his horse to face the foe.

The others did the same and the pursuers did not rush on, as they had before.

Just as they had done before, they slackened pace from fear, and did exactly what their cool foes wished.

No sooner were they within range, than Hank fired shot after shot at them, with deliberate aim, and had the satisfaction of seeing one man drop from his saddle, while the rest scampered back to the shelter of the ravine, as if they had had quite enough of the terrible marksmanship of the sheriff.

Then Hank said to Punch:

"Ef those were all the skunks we had to tackle to-night, I'd be in favor of goin' back and wipin' them out; but they ain't, boys. Naow git up and git. Those fellers won't foller us no more, or, if they do, it will be at a darned long way off."

He was right, for the Mexicans did not venture out of the ravine to follow till they had gotten a half-mile start, and then they came on in a slow hesitating way, while the Texans put their ponies to a hand gallop, and rode leisurely off to join their companions.

Thus an hour passed, when the Indian halted and made a signal for silence.

They listened intently for a minute or more, and Wild Cat observed, with an accent of conviction that had its effect on his auditors:

"Rest come; heap yellow men. Git up and git."

He turned his horse and sped away at a more rapid pace, and the run lasted for another hour, when they began to come in sight of the ponies once more.

The herd was traveling along at the leisurely pace that animals, left to themselves, naturally take, and Hank observed to Punch:

"You go ahead and burry 'em up, Punch. We don't want no stampede; but we'll hev one, if them men comes up behind us."

Punch urged his pony and rode away at a gallop to give the message, while the Indian and Hank slackened their pace to a trot.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DANDY MEXICAN.

FROM the trot the two daring men passed to a walk, and watched the figure of Punch disappearing in the moonlight, leaving them alone to face—neither of them knew exactly how many foes.

Presently the Indian halted and said:

"Must hear how many. Hold hoss."

Hank took his bridle and held the animal quiet, while Wild Cat ran a few paces back and threw himself on the ground, so as to catch the trembling that told of the coming of his pursuers.

Presently he got up and came back to Hank:

"All coming," he said, briefly.

Then he sprung on his pony and the two rode on, the sounds of their pursuers' horses coming closer every minute.

The herd of ponies ahead was quickening its pace already, and the distance increasing, but before very long the faint spots that indicated the pursuers came plainly into sight, and advanced, while the men who had been following, all along, dropped back to meet their comrades.

Hank and Wild Cat rode on at the same leisurely pace, and before another half-hour had passed, the yell raised by their pursuers announced that they were gathering courage for another attack, from the flight of the two.

Hank looked round and saw the swift advance. He drew up his horse, and raised his rifle.

"Come, Wild Cat," he said, "it is time we give them another lesson."

The Indian, with a grim smile, obeyed, and the two confronted their foes in the moonlight. Their steady attitude had the same effect as before; for a portion of their foes stopped, as if fearing the deadly aim they had tested, so much to their sorrow.

But when the figure of the dandy Mexican shot to the front, like a brilliant meteor, the sheriff remarked with a sigh:

"It's a darnation pity, Wild Cat, but I've got to wipe out that feller. He's worth all the rest."

Truly the dandy Mexican seemed to be, from the way in which he came on, ahead of all his men, waving his hat and yelling.

Hank waited till he was fairly within range, and then fired two shots in rapid succession. The first caused the paint broncho to stumble; the next sent him down on the grass, his rider rolling over his head.

The rush stopped as suddenly as if the line had been struck by lightning.

The dandy Mex can down, the rest lost heart.

But almost before the sound of the shot had died away over the prairie, the dandy Mexican was up again, waving his hat and shouting to his men to come on, while he threw his rifle to the front, and fired shot after shot in the moonlight at the sheriff, who sat on his horse and did not deign to reply.

The bullets went singing over Hank's head, but not one hit him, such was the haste and anger with which the excitable Mexican fired.

Hank saw it, and laughed as he remarked:

"You ain't as good as I thought, young feller. Hyar goes for a try at ye."

He threw up his piece, and the Mexican noted the action. The flash came, and when the smoke cleared away, there was the Mexican, flat on the earth, while Hank heaved a regretful sigh.

"Had to do it. Hated it like—"

Here he stopped, mute with surprise, as the dandy Mexican sprung up with a wild yell of triumph, and waved his hat again.

Then Hank, the Nailer, bent his brows, for he hated to be beat, and saw that his shot had missed, for some inexplicable reason.

He leveled the piece again, and fired, with his best aim, the Mexican watching him as before. This time Wild Cat watched too, and saw the other fall to one side at the flash, and leap up again, unharmed.

It did not surprise the Indian as much as it would a white man, for the tribes of the West have practiced similar tricks from time immemorial; but he told Hank, as well as he could, and the sheriff prepared to fire a third shot.

This time he took a careful aim and held a little to one side, changing the direction of the piece as he fired, to suit the way the other had dodged. But this time, also, he was deceived; for the stranger dodged the other way, and gave such a yell, echoed by his followers, that the sheriff remarked:

"This won't do, Wild Cat. We shall get a bad name at this sort of thing. Reckon I won't

fire any more, till that slippery cuss is on his boss again."

So saying he wheeled his pony and galloped off, the Mexican raising a wilder yell than before at the confession of weakness.

But, as Hank looked back over his shoulder, he noticed that the other robbers did not dare to follow, till the dandy young fellow had mounted a fresh pony. He slung his rifle to his back, remarking:

"Not much danger till that feller's on deck. He is jest a rip tearer fur a Greaser. Never saw the like afore."

So they rode on, peaceably enough, for another mile or two, when the Indian uttered an exclamation, and pointed to the flank.

A line of horsemen, going at a desperate speed, was shooting by, out of gunshot, going to the front, and Hank needed no mentor to tell him what were their intentions.

They wanted to steal ahead of him and get to the ponies, to stampede them, with a chance of driving the two marksmen into a corner, where a rush of numbers might have a chance to crush them.

But Hank was not the sort of man to let his foe steal a march on him in bright moonlight, whatever they might have done in the dark. No sooner did he detect the movement, than he set spurs to his horse, and rode on, abreast of the stealthy foe, getting nearer and nearer to them as he went, but unable to prevent them from getting ahead.

At last the singular spectacle was presented of a double chase. The men who had got between him and the ponies were riding as hard as they could, to escape from him and the Indian, while the Mexicans, under their dandy chief, were following Hank, with like persistence.

So they dashed along for another hour, till the herd of ponies came into sight once more, about a mile ahead, getting nearer every moment.

Then Hank saw the line of cowboys at the rear drop back, a few paces from the herd, and halt in the road. The Mexicans or robbers, whichever they were, in his front, began to sheer out of the course in terror, and the shift of direction at once gave him the advantage.

Urging his pony to the utmost, he shot ahead and managed to get within gunshot of the group. Flash went his rifle, and one of the men dropped from his horse, while the rest fled wildly to the side out of the course, and Hank rode on in triumph, with his Indian friend, the cheers of the cowboys drowning the yells of the Mexicans behind him.

Shortly after he was in the midst of his friends, and Punch Burleson was shouting:

"Let's go back and whip the darned skunks out of thar butes."

But Hank sternly vetoed any thing of the sort, for he knew that on him rested the responsibility of bringing back the stolen stock to the ranches in safety.

He made the irate cowboys pursue their way quietly and was rewarded by seeing the Mexican robbers give up the chase soon after.

Evidently they had had enough of it. When two men had given them so much trouble, it was pretty sure that twenty-five or thirty would "whip them out of their boots," as Punch had expressed it.

Gradually they dropped off from the rear, and the pace of the ponies, which had at one time threatened a stampede, slackened as they calmed down, till they seemed to be alone on the prairie in the moonlight. Their pursuers had vanished.

The only person who did not seem easy at the absence of the enemy was Wild Cat, who went back a mile on the trail to find what they were doing, and asked Punch Burleson to come with him.

The reckless rancher was nowise loth to obey the request, for he had been chafing under the restraint and was anxious to meet the enemy in a spot where he could have, as he expressed it, "some fun."

They did not ride back, but halted their ponies, allowing the rest to go on, and waited for some time, till the distant forms of the herd were nearly blended with the prairie-grass.

Then Wild Cat looked carefully round the horizon and said to Punch:

"Yellow man go round; head herd. Dat so, sure?"

Punch understood him at once. There was not a soul in sight, and if the Mexicans had been on the trail they must have seen them.

Wild Cat shook his bridle and rode off to the right of the trail at a rapid pace. He kept his course for an hour or more, when he suddenly halted and pointed to the east, right ahead. Punch could see nothing, but the Indian said, with absolute conviction:

"Yellow men dere."

And he pointed to a part of the horizon where Punch could see nothing.

The Indian seemed astonished that any one could be so blind, but told Punch that he could see the enemy riding rapidly along to head the herd, and that they would have to ride fast to prevent the plan from being successful.

They turned their horses and rode away at a gallop till they caught up with the herd, when they communicated the intelligence to Hank, and the sheriff took his resolution at once.

About a mile ahead was a large *motte* which promised shelter for the whole, and to this the sheriff directed the course of the herd till he had put them into the wood.

Then he established guards for the night and made preparations to repel the foe if he should dare to attack them.

The men were scattered at the edge of the wood, all round, in a thin skirmish-line, while the guards were disposed so as to command the largest portion of the horizon.

Then the cowboys went to sleep, as quietly as if there was no danger to be apprehended, but each man lay down on his arms, and the first sound from the guards would bring the sleepers on their feet, ready for anything.

Hank the Nailer, anxious for the safety of his charge, could not sleep, but lay awake for hours, watching the stars, and listening to the distant bark of the coyotes on the plain, the sure sign that no one else was there.

Nothing occurred to disturb them, but the Indian seemed to be more anxious at this than anything else, and, when the morning began to dawn, he took his pony and dashed off across the prairie, while the cowboys led out the ponies to graze, before taking up the march.

Wild Cat had been thinking, all night, of what he would have done in the place of the robbers, and had been worrying for fear they would make an attack in the gray of the dawn. When they did not, he saw that there was something afoot which he did not understand, and was proportionately fearful.

There is a great fund of superstition in the wisest of Indians, and, things that they do not understand, they fear.

The Kiowa rode away into the green grass, taking the trail ahead, to see if some ambush were not laid for the herd, but saw no signs that any one had been abroad that night. He found the old trail of the herd, when it had first been stampeded, for that was as plain as a road, but there were no signs that any one had passed it, since he himself had followed the trail to the secret corral.

But Wild Cat was not the man to be easily beaten, and he was determined to find where the enemy could be.

So he rode on, his keen eyes scanning the horizon, till at last he spied, somewhere away in the southeast, a tiny curl of smoke that he knew to be a fire.

Then he walked his horse toward it, and the nearer he got to it, the more he was convinced that it was the enemy he sought.

But why had they gone into camp and how many were there?

CHAPTER XV.

THUNDERBOLT.

ONCE more we must change the scene for the purpose of making a plain story and return to Top Notch Tom and his friends, at the ranch of the cattle company, at the moment their ponies had been swept from them by the daring rush of the robbers, under their strange chief.

For the first time since Tom had been a fighter, he was stunned and incapable of thinking what to do for a minute. He felt that the responsibility of the disaster rested on him, for not having had the horses fastened in such a way that the foe could not stampede them, and when he regarded the blank faces of his men, he knew that they saw the fact as well as himself.

The firing died away, but the enemy kept a party watching the house still, and the cowboy chief began to recover his coolness, and set his wits to work to find some way of extricating himself from his humiliating predicament.

There was a small stable at the log-house, but it contained only three or four horses, for the use of the Kimble family, and of these only one was a first-class animal for speed.

This was a thoroughbred stallion, kept for the improvement of the stock on the ranch, well-named Thunderbolt, for speed and fiery temper. The rest were tame, quiet ponies, for the ladies, not to be depended on for long efforts.

The Indian pony, so swift and tireless in the hands of men who treat it brutally and give it nothing but grass and hard work, is very apt to become a dull animal under prosperity, not to be induced to exert itself, save under spur applied in the merciless fashion of the cowboy.

Thinking over what he should do as the firing died away, Tom was recalled to himself by a voice, bailing him from the upper loop-holes of the log-house, calling out:

"Tom! Tom!"

It was the voice of his wife, and she cried:

"Are you hurt, Tom?"

"Not a bit of it," he answered cheerfully.

"The robbers have carried off the stock; that's all."

Then the women began to come down from the upper part of the house, and Helen Kimble made her appearance, when an animated discussion took place, in which all the women talked together, telling "how frightened they

had been, and how thankful they were to know that the wretches had gone away."

Only Diana and Helen, who had lived in Texas, looked grave as they heard what had happened, and when Tom beckoned to Helen to come to one side, his wife followed her.

"Look here, Helen," said the young rancher. "I've got the boys in a bad scrape, and there is no one to take them out of it but myself. The robbers have stolen all the horses, and they can get away with the plunder if some one does not follow and play them the same trick they have played us. The man to do it is myself."

Diana started and laid her hand on his arm, as if to stop him, exclaiming:

"No, no, you have had enough danger, Tom. Think how near we were separated forever! I will not see you go into peril again, for my sake."

Helen said nothing, but Tom answered:

"I'm not going for your sake, dearest. As far as that is concerned, I have got you and the children back, and that is enough for me. But that is not the question. These men are evidently a powerful band of robbers who take in the desperadoes and ruffians of half the State. They have swept the stock of the county once, and now they are at it again. If they are not stopped, we shall all be beggars."

"Better beggars than dead," said Diana earnestly, "I say you shall not go."

"And I say that I must go, or be counted a coward," said Tom gravely. "Remember, Di, you thought me that yourself, and there are men who will say that Top Notch Tom has lost his grip. He had nerve enough while his own were in peril, but when it came to other people, he was willing to let their property be swept off before his eyes, and not lift a finger to help them."

"But what can one man do against all those wretches?" pleaded Diana, who saw, from the expression of her sister's face that she sided with Tom.

"I'll tell you what I can do," said Tom, in a quiet, but resolute tone. "There is one horse in the stable that is faster than any they have got in their crowd. He can run a mile, while the best of them is distanced, though they can keep up for a short dash. If I take Thunderbolt, I can ride all round them, and keep them so much in alarm that they cannot get the stock fairly started from the feeding-grounds. Then there are the other boys left, and they can help. You saw to-day that one man on foot is worth two on horseback when it comes to shooting. They have given us a lesson, and I am going to return it."

Helen, who had been listening attentively, here gave a nod, but said nothing, and Diana turned to her with the snappish observation:

"Oh, yes, it's all very well for you; but if it was your husband, you might not be so fast to tell him to go."

Helen drew herself up to reply:

"My husband is out now, and no one knows where he is. I did not object when he went. I think that Tom's plan is a good one. He may get a chance to get some of the horses back, and then we shall be on even terms again."

Diana began to sob at once, and Helen whispered to Tom:

"Go, and God bless you. She will not say 'yes' but she will not say 'no' either, and she will be all the prouder of you, when you come back."

Tom nodded and went to his wife.

In a quick curt way, that he never used to her save when he was in earnest, he said:

"Good-by, Di. I'm going to the stable. Take care of the children, while I am away."

Then he kissed her quickly, and went off, while she said not a word.

When he was gone, she turned to Helen with a bitter expression, saying:

"Yes, it's all very well for you, miss; but you have not been through what I have, or your nerve might not be so firm."

Helen's only answer was to take her sister in her arms, where poor Di sobbed a little, and then admitted she was not well, and begged Helen's pardon for what she had said, so that peace was restored.

In the mean time Tom went to the stable of the ranch, just under the side of the house, so that it had escaped the visit of the robbers.

A loud neigh saluted him as he opened the door, and he saw the head of Thunderbolt turned toward him, as the magnificent creature welcomed the entrance of a friend.

Thunderbolt was a grand bay standing sixteen hands high, and had been a racer of no mean degree in his day.

He had a high temper, but was not reputed vicious, and was tractable till he was mounted, when he was apt to bolt with his rider, and have a run on his own account, out of pure exuberance of spirits.

Tom had lost his saddle along with his horse, but there was no lack of saddles around the log-house, and he was soon equipped in full cowboy style, in one of Hank's private saddles, his lasso coiled at the bow, his weapons with him, ready for use.

Then he led the horse out of the stable, and two cowboys had to hold it while he mounted.

Thunderbolt plunged and fretted at the delay; but the men held firmly on, while Tom gave his orders to stay by the house, and not permit a dash at it, till he came back with fresh orders.

Then he called out:

"Let go!"

And they let the bridle loose.

In a moment the stallion reared up nearly straight, and Tom dug in the spurs.

Away went Thunderbolt like the flash he was named after, and the log-house vanished while he sped off on the track of the robbers, for Tom managed to get him headed that way before he made his rush.

The young rancher knew that the horse was in the best of condition, high-fed and courageous, and let the creature have its head without a check for the first mile, when he spied the party of robbers ahead, going at a canter toward the ranch of Colonel Callahan, which was full of stock.

Thunderbolt saw the horses and neighed wildly as he swept on, but by this time Tom had him under a little more control, for he had run at his utmost speed for the mile, and was getting sobered down.

Had he come on the party sooner, it is probable that the wild stallion might have carried him into the midst of them against his will; for a thoroughbred horse is very different from an Indian pony in point of strength.

As it was, Tom passed by at full speed, Thunderbolt going as smooth as a bird, and as he came within range he fired shot after shot from his rifle into the thickest of their crowd, eliciting any number of replies, not one of which succeeded in hitting him.

His shots, on the other hand, fired by the best marksman in Texas into a dense crowd of men—on whom he had come by surprise, they not expecting him—dropped three before they had recovered from their astonishment, and Tom felt his spirits rising as he realized that he was paying the enemy for the trick played on the cowboys that morning.

He let the horse have its head, and Thunderbolt passed all the other horses easily, going to the front, where Tom rode straight away before the whole, knowing that they would find it almost impossible to hit him on account of the motion of their horses, which were straining to the utmost to catch him, while his own animal was going well within its powers.

Then he bethought him of trying the shot which had given him his name of Top Notch Tom.

At the back of the elevating sight of his Winchester rifle, where the peep-sight is usually placed, he had inserted a small mirror, which, when it was raised, afforded him a clear view of any one behind him.

With the rifle lying carelessly over his arm, so that no one knew when he was going to fire, he could depend on any object within the field of the mirror being in the line of sight of the piece, and had only to attend to the elevation to insure a shot.

He had found that elevation already, and had nothing to do, as he rode, but to adjust the mirror on the slide.

In another minute he had done this, and was watching for an opportunity to use it.

The first man to come into the field was the leader of the robbers, whom he thought to be no other than the Englishman, Berkeley, though of that he was not sure yet.

Flash!

The sharp report of the rifle echoed over the plain, and he saw in the mirror that the shot had missed the breast of the man at whom it was aimed, but had struck the horse full in the forehead, for the animal dropped like a stone, as suddenly as if struck by lightning.

The effect of the shot was to stop the pursuit in a moment, for the leader of the robbers was hurt by the fall, and got up limping and shaking his fist at the distant marksman. Tom instantly pulled up the stallion, and tried to fire a second shot when Thunderbolt was standing, but the effort was in vain. The horse wanted to run, and would not stand still long enough to allow of a perfect aim.

Then the young rancher gave up the effort, and dashed off ahead of the robbers to Callahan's Ranch, where he found three cowboys in charge, with several thousand cattle and a herd of ponies.

Hastily warning them of what was coming, he told them to drive the stock toward Satanstown as fast as they could, while he himself took thirty or forty ponies—the first he could lay hands on—and started them at full speed to the log-house of the cattle company.

He had a hard race of it, and the enemy saw what he was at and tried to intercept him.

But Thunderbolt, once in the midst of the ponies, was much more tractable than he had been, and led the way at such a pace that Tom reached the house first.

CHAPTER XVI.

TIT FOR TAT.

THE natural instinct of the ponies made them slacken their pace as they neared the house and Tom saw that his quick-witted men had been

watching him as he came, and made preparations to receive and welcome the reinforcement.

They had spread out into a line of foot skirmishers, and left a gap through which the ponies could get into the open mouth of the corral, and nowhere else.

Thunderbolt dashed ahead of the herd, which followed the stallion without any hesitation, and rushed into the corral, amid a wild yell from the cowboys who saw the trick succeed.

Tom shouted to his men to deploy round the corral and drive off the foe, who were gathering for a charge and firing at the horses in the hope of crippling them, if they could not prevent the escape.

The cowboys, who had mastered the new way of fighting, gave a loud yell and rushed out on the skirmish-line, firing as fast as they could, and driving the mounted men away from their front at once.

The enemy hovered round for a while, long enough for Tom to see that they were but a part of the force which had attacked him at first, and the knowledge inspired him with an idea which he was not slow to put into execution.

He guessed that the others were engaged in trying to stampede the herd of the Callahan or "Lame Hog" Ranch, and had sent his detachment to prevent him from interfering with them.

To prevent this, it would be necessary to get the men in front of him scattered, and his own men mounted on the fresh ponies he had brought in, leaving only a sufficient force to defend the house, in case the enemy should try another dash to capture the ladies, probably to hold them for ransom as hostages.

With this idea in his head, he told his men to stop firing, and run away, pretending a panic, leaving the horses exposed to view, while he leaped Thunderbolt over the bars, the horse being a splendid steeple-chaser, and the whole gang of cowboys made a break for the house.

As he had anticipated, this brought a dash of the enemy and they made their swoop right up to the bars of the corral, firing at the horses within, which rushed wildly from side to side.

Before they could do any harm, the cowboys at the back of the house ran out and opened on them at less than hundred-yard range, with such effect that the enemy fled in disorder, leaving more than a dozen dead and wounded behind them, who begged for quarter when they saw the angry cowboys coming down on them, on vengeance intent.

Tom rode out to stop the slaughter, for he wanted to find who were the assailants.

The prisoners, who had been taken while on the way to the Maverick corral, had refused to say a word, and had been left in charge of Hank's men; and he had not had an opportunity to question them, save to ascertain that they seemed to be Mexicans, and talked no English.

The wounded men, now taken, called for mercy in Spanish and English together, and the young rancher saw that there might be some advantage in getting out of them the numbers and composition of the robber gang, that had already done so much mischief.

He had not much time to waste, so he told his men to get the horses out of the corral, and mount as many as were tractable, while he rode up to the nearest of the wounded men and said to him in his sternest tones:

"Now then, my man, there is only one condition on which I will save your life. My men want to shoot you full of holes, and I am going to let them do it—"

"For God's sake, Cap, don't let 'em murder me," the poor fellow cried out, completely broken down by the pain of his wound, for he had been shot through the middle of the breast, and the agony made his face as pale as death already.

"Then tell the name of your chief, at once."

As Tom spoke, he drew another pistol and pointed it at the man where he lay. The wounded man, completely demoralized, and in a nervous condition from shock, shrieked out:

"Don't shoot, Cap; don't shoot, and I'll tell."

"Who is he then?"

Tom never altered his aim, but he cocked the pistol as he spoke and the man, with a look of terror that he could not hide, cried:

"It's Cap Berkeley, and Bona Vista Miguel. For God's sake don't break your word, Cap."

"And who is Bona Vista Miguel?"

Tom's tone was as stern as ever as he asked the question.

The man answered at once:

"I dunno, Cap; I swear to heavens I don't. I never seen him till this clip, and none of the boys didn't. The captain jest brung him along."

Tom put up the pistol, saying:

"That will do for the present. This man! where does he come from?"

"I dunno, Cap, I swear I don't. I told ye so fu'st, and if ye want to kill me fur tellin' the truth, I can't help it."

Seeing he was sincere, Tom rode away, and saw that his active cowboys had already caught and saddled most of the ponies in the corral, the animals doing a good deal of bucking in resis-

tance, but only succeeding in getting extra doses of spurs for their pains.

There were plenty of saddles about the ranch for the full complement of cowboys on the place was thirty, and they had extra saddles.

Within ten minutes after Tom had brought the herd in, twenty cowboys were mounted and ready to follow him where he wished.

He had not heard from the ladies this time, but as he was about to ride away from the house he heard his name called, and Helen Kimble waved her hand out of one of the upper windows, crying:

"Good-luck to you, boys! Remember that we are looking at you."

The words were just what was needed to inflame the already excitable cowboys, and they raised a yell and dashed off at full speed after Tom, who kept in the advance, following the retreating enemy, who were running for the Lame Hog Ranch as fast as they could go.

Away beyond them, Tom saw a great commotion on the prairie, and a crowd of horsemen dashing to and fro, trying to drive a tremendous herd of cattle.

Recognizing the need of prompt action, he shouted to his men:

"Shoot all you can, and run. Don't meet them. They are too many for us. But shoot and run!"

The advice suited them, and they swept on, so that in five minutes more they were in the midst of a confused fight in which the cowboys fired at the enemy and kept out of the way of a charge, while the enemy, on the other hand, had his attention divided between fighting the men who were annoying him and driving the cattle.

The tables were turned now, and Tom recognized the fact. The cattle were unwilling at any time to be driven from their pastures, and they knew the cowboys who were in the habit of attending to them, while the strangers only frightened them. They would stampede quick enough, but it was always the wrong way for the robbers, that is to say, back to their own ranch, and all the efforts of the robbers to drive them the other way were frustrated by the fire of the cowboys, who hung on their flank, shooting, as Tom had told them, but always running from any charge, and feeling that at last they had got the enemy in the same plight that the latter had caught themselves.

For nearly an hour this singular contest lasted, though, to the excited participants, it seemed but a few moments, and then the cattle made a grand break, wild with terror, for the Blue Fork, in a way that defied the utmost efforts of the robbers to stop them. The cowboys seeing that the direction of the herd was toward the more settled country, and therefore so much in their favor, did nothing to stop the rush, but fired at the men who tried to head it off, while the whole force of the robbers, seeing that their prey was about to escape them, made a grand charge after the cattle, not heeding the cowboys, so that the latter were able to ride after them and shoot them in the back, unnoticed in the confusion.

The thunder of the flying cattle, the dust and bellowing, hid the sound of the shots and a portion of the smoke; and the enemy did not realize what was being done to them till the cowboys had killed more than a dozen of their men and wounded a number more.

Then they turned, abandoning the cattle, and the way that they swooped down on the cowboys showed that they were desperate for revenge.

Tom set the example of flight; began his practice of mirror-shooting again, and in this way the chase was kept up to the ranch-house of the cattle-company, where the men on foot came running out, to protect their comrades, and a lively skirmish ensued.

A second time the wary leader of the robbers essayed the trick of fighting on foot, and stampeding the enemy's horses; but this time Tom had learned the trick, and retorted it with interest. He had a small mounted force now, and a large one on foot, while the enemy were scattered, for some of their men were still after the cattle. The numbers were more like equality than before, and he decided on a bold dash.

Sending out his men on foot, he kept the rest behind the house, mounted, till the enemy made another charge, when he issued from the shelter of the house and made a dash at their own led horses, which could be seen at a half-mile from the house, in the shelter of a *motte*, driving them out in confusion and nearly capturing the whole of them.

They were only saved by the return of the party of robbers, who were recalled by the sound of a bugle, showing that they were in military training, and made a grand charge. Then the cowboys fell back, but took with them twenty or thirty horses, that ran away and came with them, without driving, when they were ascertained to be their own animals, who had come back to the place where they had last been.

But the result of the little victory, though not great in itself, was enough to turn the scale, for it put the cowboys into possession of

enough horses to continue the fight on their ponies, without which they had felt comparatively lost.

The robbers appeared to think so too, for they drew off from the neighborhood of the log-house and rode off after the men who were trying to turn Callahan's herd back from the river.

Tom Field saw the movement and gave a weary sigh, for he saw that there was more work ahead and that it would have to be done with an insufficient force, already tired out with its exertions that day.

He turned to his men to say:

"Boys, the fight isn't over yet. Those fellows will run off Callahan's stock if we don't go after them. Are you ready to follow?"

There was no more yelling now, but Soger Jake answered for the rest:

"I reckon we will, Cap. As long as you stick we stick too, hey, boys?"

There was a murmur of assent, and the men began to dismount and tighten their girths for the new fray.

Tom saw that he could depend on them, and he had fifty good mounted men now, with twenty-five or thirty to leave at the house.

"Who will stay behind and take care of the ladies?" he asked. "I don't mean fight, but who is the man you are willing to trust to take command, and will promise to obey his orders?"

The men hesitated, and at last one of them said:

"We don't need no captain while the ladies is here, sir. Mrs. Kimble is the best captain we kin git, fur we'll all die fur her."

The words drew forth a cheer from the men, and Tom looked up to the window and called to Helen, who came down at once and stood on the piazza. He spoke to her earnestly, and told her what to do, the men listening quietly. She said very little, but expressed herself willing to take the defense of the place, and Tom left her in charge as he rode away.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECOND RAID.

ON the same day that Top Notch Tom made his gallant fight against the robbers who had come down on the ranches, Hank, the Nailer, had his hands full, before noon.

Wild Cat as soon as he spied the smoke on the prairie, which he knew to be the camp-fires of his foes, went into a *motte* where he would be hidden from view, and climbed a tree at the edge, whence he could obtain a good look over the plain.

His eyes were "as good as any ordinary field glass," as one has said who has had an opportunity to judge of the power of Indians in the line of vision, and he soon saw the cause of the smoke he had spied.

There was a camp in that direction, and the horses were picketed in the very path that the reclaimed herd of ponies must take, to get to the Blue Fork.

Wild Cat, with his long experience of prairie warfare, took pains to count the numbers of men he could see, and made out that it was the same force that had stopped them for awhile the night before, under the lead of "the dandy Mexican."

He watched them for near an hour, without seeing any evidence of a movement among them, and concluded that they had made up their minds to wait for the movement of the ponies and try to stampede them on the way.

While he was watching, and when the sun had climbed half-way up to the zenith, the quick eye of the Indian scout detected some moving objects, in the distance beyond the camp, and, from the manner in which they came on, knew that a herd of cattle was being driven that way.

He knew this, though he could not see them with the distinctness of a glass. But he was used to interpreting "sign," and, as with other Indians, it was not so much what he saw distinctly, as what he knew certain appearances meant, that enabled him to say to himself at once, that a herd of cattle was coming, driven, or overdriven, by the friends of the robbers in his front.

This made the problem before the Indian, as to how he was to save his own herd, so much the more difficult.

He felt, as he had done in the days when his tribe went on the war-path, and returned home, loaded with booty, when they were intercepted by a strong force of a rival tribe and wanted to save what they had, but saw little chance.

Now he was on another errand, for he was trying to save property that he had rescued for its rightful owners, and it was the robbers who were after it.

He watched the advance of the herd and saw that it had been spied from the camp; for several horsemen dashed out to reconnoiter, and came back with the men who were driving the herd, as if they had recognized them as friends.

Then Wild Cat saw that the cattle had been halted, and that a band of horsemen had been sent out from the camp, and were coming toward the very *motte* in which he was hidden.

He waited till they were within a mile, when he slipped down at the other side of the *motte*.

and rode off to warn his friends, seeing that the enemy was not coming on at more than a slow trot, and evidently not in a hurry.

He reached the camp after a sharp gallop, and told Hank what he had seen; when the sheriff at once divined that the enemy were coming to have a try at stampeding the ponies, and killing their defenders.

And there were but thirty-five men in the party, all told, while the foe, according to Wild Cat's count, could not be far from eighty men.

But it was plain that, if they undertook to drive the ponies out on the plain, they would be incumbered with them, and the question remained what was best to do.

It was in this juncture that Hank turned to Punch Burleson, with the question:

"What had we best do, Punch? You used to be in the war, I know, and it's gittin' to that pitch that there's more men than I can rightly handle. What would you do, ef you was me?"

Punch looked round at the ponies, and answered, without a moment's hesitation:

"I'd drive the beasts into the wood; fell as many trees as I could, to keep 'em in; and stand 'em off, afoot. We had to do it, many a time, when the hosses was tired, and I never see the crowd could drive us aout of a breast-work in a wood."

The advice seemed to please Hank, for he answered:

"I was thinkin' of that very thing, myself; but I never had any chance to do it, bein' too young then. We'll do it, Punch."

The willing hands of the cowboys drove the ponies into the wood at once, and they got them in before any sign of an enemy made its appearance. The Indian, by his rapid riding, had gained a full three miles on the leisurely advance of the robbers.

There were plenty of axes in the crowd, and the men were all expert at the use of their tools.

Tree after tree fell, in a marvelously short space of time, and the wood was put into a state of defense that promised at least to keep the ponies from breaking out, if not their covetors from breaking in.

The axes were still ringing on the trees, and the sound of the falling trunks was crashing through the air, when Wild Cat gave a shrill whistle and pointed out on the prairie, where the whole force of the robbers was assembled.

Hank saw that the sight had produced its effect on his men, for there were nearer a hundred men on the enemy's force than eighty, and they had a very dangerous appearance as they came in full view, the sun glittering on their weapons.

To keep the men from looking at them, he called out, as if to reprove them for shirking work:

"Hack at the trees, boys. The more of *them* ye git daown the more kiver ye'll have."

The words were greeted with a wild yell that served as a challenge to the enemy, and they put spurs to their horses and came on at a gallop, with their hats waving as if they meant to charge home on the cowboys.

But, just as the night before, they had not the heart for the attack, and swerved aside, when yet out of gunshot, the action exciting a new yell, more ironical and scornful than before.

Then the axes rung merrily, and the fortification began to assume a respectable appearance, when the Indian touched Hank on the shoulder, and pointed to the enemy.

They had halted out of gunshot, dismounting from their horses under the shelter of another *motte*, while a line of foot skirmishers was forming rapidly in front of the horses.

Hank turned to Punch Burleson, uneasily.

"I ain't used to this kind of fightin' yet, Punch," he said. "What does that mean?"

Punch grinned. He felt at home now, for it reminded him of old times. Moreover, he was not above being a little proud of his ability to give lessons to Hank, the Nailer, the best man in Texas at a single combat.

"It means that they're a-goin' to try a charge at us," he answered. "But that needn't skeer ye, Hank. We've got the kiver, and they *ain't*. We'll jest everlastingly slaughter them."

Then the work went on, and the whole front and border of the wood was lined with men, at some thirty feet from each other, while Punch went round giving each man directions how to shelter himself best; for this wood-fighting was a novelty to the men of the plain.

Then they watched the enemy coming on slowly till the long line was within gunshot, when a hail of rifle-shots came pattering in among the leaves, but without effect, for the shelter of the tree-trunks was perfect, and the low breast-works of logs were ample to repel any assault in front.

The cowboys made no reply at first, for Hank had given the word that "no one was to fire before he did," and the line of robbers came on till the men behind the trees could almost distinguish the features of individuals.

They were most of them in Mexican dress, but here and there was a white face, a few Indians were among them in the flowing garb of the savage.

Suddenly the rifle of Hank the Nailer spoke from behind a tree and a man dropped dead, not a hundred yards from the breastwork.

The shot was the signal for a general volley, and when the smoke cleared away the robbers were running as hard as they could, all but some dozen or more, who lay on the grass in the agony of death.

Hank stopped the fire, for he had to be saving of his ammunition, and the cowboys set to work to compare damages.

So far, no one on their side had been hurt, thanks to the protection of the trees.

What damage had been done to the enemy, beyond the dead men in front of the breastwork, could not be ascertained; but that he was not going to let the matter go by default, was made evident in a few minutes when the cowboys saw the line begin a stealthy advance, extending as it came.

The Texans, unused to the tactics of regular warfare, did not at first see the design of this movement, but it soon became plain when the fire was opened from several quarters at once, and a mounted band made a dash at the rear of the position, compelling the scanty force of defenders to scatter to many points at once to save themselves from being run in on.

Before long the cowboys began to find the shelter of the wood far from perfect, as they could hardly get one side sheltered when a shot would come from another point; and more than one cry of pain went up from the wood as a man got a bullet through some part of his body inadvertently exposed.

Even Hank began to look anxious when a cry was raised by the enemy, and the force in front rapidly retreated, with no visible cause.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FORTUNE OF WAR.

THE cause of the retreat from the front of the sheriff's *posse* was visible in another moment, when a fierce fire was heard on the other side of the robbers, and they were seen to be shooting as fast as they could, while not a single bullet came in the direction of the intrenchment.

Punch Burleson was the first to say anything, and he hurried up to Hank with an eager whisper:

"Hank, the boys has come out, and I'll bet that's Tom Field, with his gang. We got to go out and help 'em, or they'll git wiped aout. They got a lot of men, but they ain't like aour boys, and Tom's all alone with 'em. What d'ye say to a sally?"

Hank looked mystified.

"A sally; who's Sally, Punch?"

"I mean a rush-out, a scrimmage, man. Call it anything ye like, but don't wait too long, fur time ain't to be fooled away in a fight like this."

Hank gazed at the enemy in silence for a moment. As he had said, he was not used to handling any larger body of men than a party of ten or a dozen, and the number of points he had to look to, confused him, for the first time since he had been in action.

Punch, who was an old soldier, saw the necessity of a charge to keep their friends from being cut to pieces in detail, and gave his advice on that basis.

It did not take long to muster the men; for they were aching for a chance to revenge on the robbers the loss they had already sustained.

Out they rushed, over the log breastworks, and after the enemy they went, opening fire in the rear of a force that was already hotly engaged in front.

The result was rapid and decisive.

They had already had experience that the robbers, however well led, were not of the stuff that is to be depended on in a fight against odds, and before the cowboys had run three hundred yards out of their defenses, there was a grand scattering of the robbers, and they fled in all directions, some taking to the *motte* where their horses were tied, others over the prairie in confusion, while a force of mounted men came tearing down to meet the sheriff's *posse*, and yelled their delight at meeting their friends.

Top Notch Tom, on Thunderbolt, was the first up, and he was flushed with success, while Punch was waving his hat and yelling himself hoarse, and Hank, the Nailer, had caught the general excitement and was yelling as loud as any one there.

Then came a short, animated skirmish, as the cowboys who had come with Tom Field fired at the robbers, trying to get their horses; but the latter seemed to be desperate at last, and managed to get out of the *motte* and run away, hotly pursued by the cowboys.

The men of Hank's detachment could not join in the pursuit, for they had barricaded the ponies in so securely that they could not get them out in time, while Punch, who had had experience of the changes of fortune in a cavalry skirmish, called to Tom:

"Don't let 'em go too fur, Tom, or the other fellers may turn on them."

But it was no use trying to restrain the cow-

boys, once started, with the enemy in full flight, and away they went, scattering in pursuit of the flying parties of the foe, till they had disappeared behind the timber, while Hank was hard at work, getting his men and ponies out.

They heard the firing growing more distant, and Tom, anxious at the way the men were scattering, rode off at a gallop to recall them, while Punch assisted the sheriff in getting out the best men of his *posse*.

Twenty minutes later or thereabouts, came a grand burst of firing behind the timber, and, to the consternation of the sheriff, the cowboys who had come up under Tom Field came tearing back in wild confusion, followed by a force of robbers, who seemed as numerous as ever.

Top Notch Tom was nowhere to be seen, and the men were running as hard as they could, while the enemy, under the command of the dandy Mexican and the leader whom they thought to be Berkeley, came after them in a dense body.

The robbers did not come within gunshot of the sheriff, but swerved off to the *motte*, where they had left their horses, and soon after made their appearance, driving the herd of cattle in a wild stampede past the *motte* where the cowboys had taken refuge, behind the fortification.

There was a tremendous cloud of dust, and a great bellowing, and then they swept by, yelling ironically at the discomfited cowboys, while Punch, with a rueful grin, said to the sheriff:

"They ain't no good to fight us, man to man; but that feller that leads them is an almighty good man at a scrimmage."

So it seemed, for the men who had come in with Tom Field seemed to be completely demoralized at the way in which they had been sent to the rear, when they felt surest of success.

When the excitement had quieted down a little, the sheriff had time to question them, and heard the following story:

They had chased the robbers all over the prairie, scattering as they went, till they began to find themselves too far apart to do any good, and heard a cry in the rear to rally.

Then, as they came in by twos and threes, they were suddenly confronted by a body of about thirty men, headed by the dandy Mexican, who had ridden in among them, shooting as they came, and keeping in a body stronger than any of the small parties that the cowboys could rally.

The consequence was the stampede of all the Texans in sight, the enemy gathering strength as he came, till his body included all the men they had been chasing who had not been killed.

What had become of Top Notch Tom no one knew, save that he had been seen, chased by a party of the enemy, and riding in front of them, firing his wonderful back-shots as he went.

The cowboys had lost in the stampede, run down and slaughtered without mercy, no less than forty men out of a total of a hundred and five, including Hank's party, and the loss had dispirited them to such a degree that the sheriff saw that he could not depend on them for a fight any more.

The cattle that Tom had striven to save and turn back were on the track to the Indian Territory and the only thing saved from the wreck was the herd of ponies that they had barricaded in the *motte*.

And the sun had passed the zenith, and was declining, while Top Notch Tom and the Indian chief, Wild Cat, were missing.

What had become of them no one could say with certainty, for Wild Cat had dashed off in the early part of the fight, and had gone round the edge of the timber, after a flying Mexican, since which no one had seen him.

But the enemy had gone out of the road to the Blue Fork, and there was yet time to send the ponies on to Satanstown, and organize a party to follow up the robbers and try to take back some of the cattle.

It was in these circumstances of doubt and discouragement that the spirit of the dauntless sheriff shone out at its brightest.

He knew what men he had on whom he could rely, and spoke out, as soon as everything was quiet:

"Boys," he said, "this is all my fault and I'm the man that's to blame. I'm Sheriff of Satanta county, and I've got the order of the county jedge to foller and arrest the men that's been disturbing the county. The property that was fust stolen is hyar, and the owner is hyar too. Limpy Balstrop, air you willin' to take this hyar herd of ponies back to the Blue Fork, and give me a receipt fur them?"

Limpy brightened up at once.

"If I kin have about twenty of the boys to help, I'll do it, Hank," he said.

Hank nodded.

"Ye kin have all that wants to go."

Then he turned to Callaban.

"Cunnel," he said, "they tell me that the beasts that was driven by hyar, a while ago, had your brand. Is that so?"

Callaban smiled ruefully.

"Ay, ay, Hank. I suppose it's fair for every man to take his turn."

"Air you willing to help git 'em back?" asked the sheriff steadily.

Callahan nodded.

"If you're willing to go after them, Hank, it's a poor spirited cur I'd be, if I didn't ride with ye to help, and take me boys along."

The sheriff seemed pleased, for he smiled as he turned to Punch Burleson.

"And haow abaout you, Punch?"

"I'm ready go with ye, wherever ye want me, Mr. Sheriff. I'm one of the posse, and I hain't see'd the posse go back on ye yit, whatever these men, that was so darned sudden, did, when they found the work gittin' hot."

The sheriff turned to Deaf Smith and roared in his ear:

"We're talkin' of sendin' back the ponies, and goin' arter the cattle. Will you go along?"

Deaf Smith hesitated, and asked:

"What's that you say? Speak plainer. I can't hyar when a man shaouts."

Callahan who was used to speaking to the deaf rancher, who was very sensitive on the subject of his hearing, said slowly:

"They want to go after my stock. Will you help?"

Deaf Smith seemed to be surprised.

"Your stock, cunnel? Hev you lost any stock?"

Callahan nodded, and Deaf Smith answered at once:

"Then I'll go along and help. Ain't the man to go back on a neighbor."

The sheriff seemed to be well pleased at the way the men he most relied on spoke.

"Then it's settled, gentlemen," he said. "If thar warn't anything else, we hev to look arter Top Notch Tom. If them other galoots had obeyed his orders, we mightn't be in the way we air naow. Come, Mr. Balstrap, git yer hosses and men aout. All we want is abaout fifty men we kin depend on to 'bey orders, and not run all over the country a-chasin' men that was runnin'!"

He spoke rather bitterly, for he felt much mortified at the turn affairs had taken.

The men he meant were equally ashamed of themselves, for they avoided his eye; but they went to work with the rest to clear away the obstructions that had been piled before the edges of the timber to keep the ponies from being stampeded, and the herd was driven out and put on the home track, which the animals took readily, for they seemed to scent their old pastures.

An hour later the herd was out of sight on the southern horizon, with Limpy Balstrap and some twenty cowboys with them, while the remainder, amounting to fifty-two men, including the ranchers, were starting for the north on the trail of the robbers and the cattle they had driven away in triumph.

There was no more shouting and excitement now, for the risk was too great, and the men all knew it. They had lost prestige in the fight just finished, after everything had promised well, and their numbers were not as great as the men they were going after.

Nevertheless, Punch Burleson, with an air of some satisfaction, said to Hank, as they rode at the head of the column side by side:

"We're better off than we was this mornin', Hank, for we've sent back part of the plunder, and the men we've got hyar will all stick. I've see'd the time when ten men, to be trusted, is a heap better than fifty that runs wild all over the preerie. We're a-goin' to make things howl this time, and don't you furgit it!"

Hank made no answer for some time, appearing to be buried in thought as he rode on.

At last he said, musingly:

"I wonder who that dandy feller in the Mexican togs kin be, Punch? He's a bu'ster, whoever he is, and I'd kinder hate to kill him."

"Why?" asked the old soldier, not seeming to be able to understand the feelings of the other. "I'd kill him, darned quick, if I got the chance; but he ain't so easy killed, Hank."

The sheriff nodded in the same thoughtful way.

"I dunno why I think so, but somehow I don't like the idee of killin' him," he replied. "He's too pretty to be shot, Punch."

Punch only laughed at the idea.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CONFEDERATES.

ONCE more at the corral where Old Cross-Eye and Tom Field had herded the Mavericks, by which they made their subsistence, in days gone by; but this time in the midst of the robber band, that had made such daring raids into the county of Satanta.

The night had come, and the stars were up in the heavens, as two men rode rapidly across the prairie from the northern side, coming from the Indian Territory, or at least from that quarter, and dashed into the narrow path that led into the natural corral.

One of them wore the plumes of an Indian, as one might see in the starlight, and the other

rode a large, powerful bay horse, that towered beside the pony of its companion, like a six-footer beside a dwarf.

The Indian took the lead into the timber, and as soon as they got inside, he sprung from his horse, and said to his companion, in the tongue of the Kiowas:

"This is the place, and they will come here at about midnight. We have time to make everything as it should be."

His companion answered, in the voice of Tom Field, rather sadly:

"I fear we two cannot do much now, Wild Cat, but if we had a few more, with Hank at the head, we might make a stand that would puzzle them."

The Indian made an impatient gesture.

"On the war-path a warrior takes what comes and the tale of the battle is not told till the end. The Man-who-shoots will not be wanting, though the rest have fled. He will come to us, and he is worth more than a hundred of such as you had. Take a lesson from your foe, white friend. The men he has, are not like ours, and they are afraid of the white faces; but he has made them fight well, for he fights as the red-man fights. When the buffalo meets the wolf, the wolf flees; but when ten wolves find one buffalo, they take him and kill him. They follow the herd and take one at a time, till the herd is gone. That is to be our way now. The yellow man has played the wolf on us, but we know the game as well as he, and we have the better wolves. His are but the cowardly coyotes, and we have the great gray wolf, that can bite hard."

As he spoke, he took his pony into the depths of the wood, followed by Top Notch Tom, and the animals were bestowed into a small clearing, nearly half a mile from the entrance of the path, hidden from sight and hearing, and only to be approached by a narrow way that was blocked up with bushes and wound to and fro in the thickest part of the timber and underbrush, till the clearing was reached, when a sort of stable was revealed, where three or four horses could be put, without any one suspecting that they were there.

From the stable, another path was provided by which the animals could be taken to the prairie without returning the same way, and both men knew the secret had not been discovered by the robbers, Wild Cat having ascertained that fact on his former visit to the timber, when he was scouting for the sheriff's party.

So much arranged, Tom was going away when Wild Cat looked at the great stallion with a doubtful air, remarking:

"When he hears horses he may roar for company. He must be quiet. Let us put on a muzzle."

Tom assenting to the idea, the stallion was first securely hobbled with straps and thongs, after which they fastened a strap over his nose in such a way that any attempt to open his mouth would result in the nostrils being pinched and so prevent more than a low whinny that could not be heard far.

That done, the two men stole away and Thunderbolt began to call after them, but his neigh was so low that Wild Cat remarked, in a tone of satisfaction:

"He is safe for the present, and we have time to work."

They stole off to the path and out into the prairie by another way, when the Indian said:

"We are just in time. Harken to the noise of the cattle coming."

Tom listened intently and could hear, or rather feel, a sullen trembling of the ground that rose in o the noise of many feet trampling the prairie, and told of the advance of the great herd of stolen cattle and the robbers.

The men went and hid themselves in the timber, and the noise increased till the dark forms of the cattle were seen coming to the corral, the men driving hovering on the flanks, and sending them toward the narrow path till the foremost got in; the whole herd followed, grumbling and bellowing, and the animals were safe inside.

Then Wild Cat chuckled, as he whispered:

"Now they are in the trap and the rest is easy."

It seemed as if the Indian, though he knew that he and his companion were all alone with a hundred or more foes in front, felt certain of triumph from the way he spoke.

From that moment, he lay down in the brushwood, and listened tranquilly to the trampling of ponies and cattle, that continued for near an hour, as the great herd was driven into the haven of refuge and rest that the robbers had found so convenient before.

At last the noise quieted down, and the red glow of fires shone through the intervals of the trees, making the tops of the little saplings crimson, while the noise of voices in loud conversation came through the timber.

Then Wild Cat rose and touched his friend on the shoulder, saying:

"It is time we went nearer to hear what they are saying. We must see if they have put guards at the ravine."

They crept off through the timber, and after a long and tedious clamber, on hands and knees,

came to the edge whence they had a full view of the corral.

It was full of cattle, feeding ravenously or lying down, with a sprinkling of ponies.

The men who had driven them there were scattered round the edge of the timber, by their fires; and the forms of several sentinels were visible against the sky, pacing along the edge of the ravine, showing that the robbers did not propose to be caught a second time, in the same way.

The Indian peered round for some time, till Tom whispered:

"The chiefs! where are they?"

Wild Cat made no answer till he had peered all round the corral a second time, when he said:

"They are not here; they must be by the hut. Let us go there and see."

Tom followed him and another tedious creeping spell was necessary, to bring them to the place where they wished to be.

At last they got to a point whence they could see, through the trees, the glow of a fire, and by it the figures of two men, both in Mexican dress, who were talking earnestly together. One of them smoked a pipe of black wood, that looked as if it had seen a good deal of service, and the other held between his fingers the slender white cigarette, that Mexicans love.

Tom had never seen the dandy Mexican, who had done so much damage, the day before, to the men of Hank's party, but he could not help the whisper to Wild Cat:

"A fine fellow, that!"

The Indian curled his lip slightly.

He did not seem to be much taken by the looks of the other; but Tom could not help being struck by a certain grace and beauty in every motion of the stranger, that betrayed the perfect health and activity of one who had a frame of no ordinary mold.

The stranger seemed rather small beside the tall, heavy figure of the leader, in whom Tom, now that he was nearer, did not fail to recognize the figure of Berkeley.

The Englishman had grown stouter than he had been when Tom first saw him, as the manager of the cattle company. His cheeks had come to that flabby and pendulous condition that shows on men past forty, who have lived high, no matter how slender and handsome they may have been in former years.

Berkeley was not yet gross, but he gave token of being on the way to that state; and to Tom, who remembered him as the tall, stalwart blonde, who was the picture of a guardsman, the change was much for the worse, though Berkeley would still have been called a handsome man in any ball-room.

His beard was dyed black, and that altered and rather improved his appearance, though the light gray eyes contradicted the hue of the hair.

He was richly dressed, in the same style as his companion, and wore pistols at his sash, while the butt of a richly-ornamented Winchester rifle showed that he had not forgotten his taste for handsome weapons.

The youngster by his side did not look over twenty at the outside, with a figure as slim as a girl, a waist that one might have spanned with two hands, and a face as smooth as a peach, save for the dark mustache that showed by its color, more than it would otherwise have done, for it was the faintest and fuzziest of down.

He had very large, melting eyes that would have sent most ladies wild after him, and he wore his rakish costume with the air of a native.

As Tom and the Indian lay there, in the wood, fifty feet from the pair, there was such a stillness round them, that they could hear what was said.

The language was Spanish, and Tom understood enough of that to make out the words.

The youngster broke silence first, after a long spell, in which he made a new cigarette, with a readiness peculiarly Spanish.

"Don Giorgio," he said with a smile that showed a row of the whitest of teeth under the black down of his mustache. "What do you think of doing to-morrow?"

Berkeley scowled darkly at the ground.

"If we had men that one could depend on," he growled, "I should say, send on the cattle and take another swoop. We have the time yet, and could take a better haul than we made before. But what's the use, Miguel? The men won't fight, and there is no use trying to make them. As soon as it gets to a hot place, they are ready to let go. I am sick of having to be captain, sergeant, and high private, in one, and I will not do it any more. We have made enough for a good spree down in Mexico, and the first lot of cattle must be half-way to the Rio Grande by this time—"

His companion interrupted him with a low musical laugh, that made Tom start: the voice was so much like a girl's.

"Half-way there, truly; and they will never think of looking that way," he said. "They are all abroad about the secret way that the Apaches used to take in the harvest-moon raids; but I was brought up among them, *amigo*, and there

is not a white man in the country that could follow where those cattle have gone, without a guide. I will wager that they get safe to Durango, and that all of your Yankee soldiers could not stop them, if we gave them the route, and left the way open."

"Then I suppose we had better take these the same way," observed Berkeley.

Miguel laughed again.

"You are a little too fast, *amigo*. We have to pay toll to our friends, the Apaches and Jicarillas, first. It is the cheapest in the end, for our Indian friends are very jealous of their rights, but the easiest men to fool in a bargain that you can find. They alone know the way, and I should not dare to take it—I could follow it, with my eyes shut—unless they said that they permitted it. Ab, *amigo*, if ever you fall foul of those men you would wish that you had kept the peace."

Berkeley seemed uneasy at the words of his friend, for he said quickly:

"I didn't mean anything of that sort, Miguel; but it is important that we should get off, and it is certain that we shall be followed by that devil of a fellow, they call Hank the Nailer. Confound him! I have cause to remember him. He is worse than you."

Miguel showed his teeth in an evil smile, that made the dark beauty of his face so much like that of Satan, that Tom shuddered involuntarily.

"Exactly. It is the same man, they tell me, who fired at me so often. Some day I will cut the comb of this fine cock, that crows so loudly, and you can bet on the winning bird, *amigo*."

"But about the Indians, Miguel. I thought that, when we came here, we had everything straight. The cattle are not so much exhausted but they can be taken off to-morrow—"

"On the contrary, *amigo*, they can do no such thing," retorted the Mexican. "We shall have to wait here till we get the message from the chief of the Jicarillas, or it would not be safe to stir. If we did—"

"Well, what if we did?"

"We should be liable to meet Agostino and his friends somewhere in the passes of the Sierra Madre, and they would cry 'halt.' Do you know what that means, *amigo capitán*?"

"But how many are there?" interrupted the Englishman, frowning.

"Enough to stop a regiment, *amigo*, if there are but twenty. They know every pass, and can come down on us, when we should be unable to defend ourselves. They could roll down the rocks from a thousand feet overhead, and laugh at the bullets of our rifles. No, no, *amigo*, we must wait till Agostino says we can come. It will cost us ten per cent. of the herd, but that is better than losing it all, and our lives into the bargain."

"How long do you suppose it will be before he sends an answer?" asked Berkeley, sullenly.

"By sunset to-morrow at the earliest."

"And suppose the sheriff comes up in the mean time, Miguel?"

"Then we must give the sheriff a taste of what our men can do, when they have nothing but their faces to cover. We can hold this place against an army. You saw what the cowboys did, when they had a wood behind them."

"But how shall we get the stock out?"

Miguel laughed.

"Agostino will see to that. I have sent him word that we have ten thousand head, and he can afford to send his men for that. You will find they can fight as these cowboys never saw men fight. When they attack, the enemy, we drive the cattle out, and after that let them follow us, if they dare."

CHAPTER XX.

THE SQUAW CHIEF.

TOP NOTCH TOM, in the darkness of the wood, turned to Wild Cat, to see if the Indian understood what was being said, and the chief nodded. He had been brought up in the days when Texas was chiefly inhabited by Spaniards and Spanish-speaking people, and knew more of the tongue of the south than he did of English.

Then they strained their ears to catch what was going on, and the dandy Mexican continued:

"Don Giorgio, you have said some bad things as to the courage of my countrymen; but you may find that they can fight as well as these men of the north, when they get a fair chance. It seems to me that, for a man who is all alone in the midst of us, as you are, the implications you have been pleased to cast on us are out of place."

His tone was unmistakably hostile, and he frowned at Berkeley, in a way that showed he held the big Englishman in no fear, spite of the disparity of size.

Berkeley seemed to be taken aback at the tone assumed by the other, and his own manner was apologetic as he replied:

"Why should we two quarrel, Miguel? We are in the same boat, and cannot afford to do it. Besides, I meant nothing against your nation. I only spoke of the fact you know yourself, that you and I have had to rally those men, every

time there was any danger; and if it had not been for us, they would have abandoned the cattle and gone off, long ago."

Miguel sneered slightly.

"I know all that, as well as you do; but you have talked too loud for your own good, and the men are beginning to grumble. You must not think that, because you have served in foreign armies, we Mexicans know nothing of warfare. Who made the plan of this raid, and who has carried it out, but myself?"

"I know that, Miguel," the Englishman responded in the same apologetic way. "Come, come; why should we quarrel? Forget I said anything."

Miguel curled his lip.

"As you please, Don Giorgio. You have an idea that you are a great warrior, but you may find yourself mistaken. I know of one Mexican who is not afraid to let you go where you came from, and carry out this raid alone."

"And who is that?" asked Berkeley, nettled at the unmistakable tone of contempt.

Miguel leaned back where he was lying on the grass, facing the Englishman, and Tom saw that his hand was playing with a long knife, that lay on the grass under his side, concealed by his body from the other.

"That man is myself," he said, in a manner of indescribable insolence. "I have had enough of such talk, and it has got to stop, sir. After this, confine yourself to doing what your duty requires, and let the men take care of themselves. I can make them fight, without you."

Tom could see both faces, and the brows of Berkeley contracted into a savage frown; but he said nothing but:

"Very well, Don Miguel, if you wish to force a quarrel on me, it is not my fault."

Miguel sneered more openly than before, as he answered:

"I know that. You are wise to take that way of escape from the consequences of your words. In one word, you are not so brave as you pretend to be, Don Giorgio."

The Englishman lifted his body from the earth and faced the other with an ugly light in his eyes, as he said:

"If you are in earnest, wait till this thing is over, and I will give you all the satisfaction you want."

Miguel laughed aloud as he replied:

"There is no need of waiting, Don Giorgio. I am the originator of this expedition, and you are the second in command. You appear to mistake our respective roles. I am not the man to shelter myself behind a difference of rank, and I tell you that there is no need of waiting. If you wish to begin, I am here, and there is no time like now, sir."

In a moment the big Englishman was on his feet, and had his hand on one of the pistols in his belt.

Miguel merely poised the knife that he had held in his fingers all the time, with the cool remark:

"If you think best to draw it, do so; but I tell you to sit down."

And, to Tom's surprise, the Englishman wavered an instant, when Miguel repeated the words in a stern tone:

"Sit down, sir!"

The words were emphasized by the way he poised the knife, ready to throw; and to Tom's wonder, the other, after a struggle, in which it was clear that he was getting cowed, sat down on the grass, and removed his hand from his belt, saying sullenly:

"Oh, curse your tricks! I don't understand the people in this part of the country."

Miguel laughed in a more good-humored way, for it seemed as if he was satisfied with the triumph he had gained.

"I was but jesting, *amigo*," he said, more placably, "to show you that we Mexicans can fight on occasion as well as you northern men. If you had put your hand on that pistol I might have had to split your heart, and been very sad for the deed afterward. It is a singular thing that I never killed a man but I was very sorry for it, and I have always taken the trouble to have him properly interred and masses to be said for the repose of his soul. Are we friends now?"

Berkeley nodded sulkily.

"As much as we ever were," he said. "If you have nothing further to say, I feel sleepy, and will go to bed. Have you any orders for me, as you are the first in command?"

Miguel shook his head.

"None. I know my men better than you do, and they will take care we are not surprised to-night. The ravine is guarded. By the by, you have been here before, *amigo*, and it is rather singular that you had no knowledge of the way those men got the ponies out."

Berkeley looked confused at this implication on his tactics, which seemed to hurt him more than all the taunts of the other.

"I have been here before, it is true; but you were the chief in command, as you say, and it was not my responsibility. Besides, who would have thought those fellows could have made the march they did, and surprised us as they did?"

"That is true, and I should not have mentioned it had you not been so fast to abuse my

men for being driven back by a surprise. Good-night, Don Giorgio."

He spoke rather stiffly, and the Englishman retired to another part of the woods, leaving the dandy Mexican alone by the fire.

The men on guard seemed to be the only persons awake now; for silence had fallen on the place, and the two watchers in the timber could see the handsome young dare-devil who had cowed down the Englishman, smile to himself as he rolled a fresh cigarette.

There was something in his air and attitude, now that he was alone, that riveted Tom's attention—why, he could hardly tell.

There was an air of effeminacy about this youth that contradicted the scornful words and resolute actions of which they had just seen him to be capable.

The smoothness of his face and the slender contour of his figure were decidedly more like a girl than a boy, and Tom could not help a suspicion that Buena Vista Miguel, the desperado, was none other than a woman in disguise.

The only thing that contradicted the supposition was the cool daring they had just seen him display, and the way in which he had faced down the imposing Englishman, whose anger had been intense and dangerous.

Tom hardly thought it possible that any woman could have shown so much steady courage, forgetting that Joan of Arc and several other remarkable women have shamed men in their time.

Tom watched Miguel carefully, when the desperado thought he was alone, to catch any feminine movement, that might betray the other.

Miguel rolled the cigarette in his slender fingers with a grace that was feminine, but Tom had seen many a handsome young *vaquero* do the same, and had noticed the effeminate ways of many young Spaniards before.

Then the dandy smoked quietly for a minute or two, and rose to go away.

They saw him leave the spot and waited for his return, thinking that he would not be long.

Tom whispered to Wild Cat:

"Where do you suppose he has gone?"

Wild Cat answered:

"To look after his guards. I know who he is, now. That is the one they call the Squaw Chief, and no one knows whether he be a woman or a man. He fights like a man, and looks like a woman."

"Did you ever see him before?" asked Tom, much interested in the story.

"No. He is a friend of Agostino and the Jicarillas, and they have been at war with us for more generations than the white man has been in the land."

The tone of the Indian was grave, as if he was communicating important intelligence, and Tom Field asked him, with equal gravity:

"What force do you think this Agostino will bring with him, if he comes to help the robbers carry away their plunder?"

Wild Cat considered a minute before he answered:

"The Jicarillas can bring seventy warriors into the field, but they are worth a hundred and seventy in their own ground against our Kiowas, and five hundred against the white men. Nevertheless, if we can get them on the plain, they are worth no more than fifty."

The sentence puzzled Tom.

"I do not understand you," he said. "What do you mean by that?"

The Indian answered at once:

"The Jicarillas are men of the mountains, and not at home on the plains. Our men are used to the plains, as your men are. We have fought them in the mountains, and they have beaten us; but on the plains we have beaten them, every time we met them. Our chance will come when they are here, and it shall be my place to go to my tribe and summon them to our help."

"What! will they come?" asked Tom, delighted at the idea.

Wild Cat nodded.

"They will come, if the white Man-who-shoots" (he meant Hank the Nailer) "will give them a writing they can show the agent, that none may say they went from the reservation without leave. Our people are few, and the white robbers are on the watch, all the time, for an opportunity to steal their lands. If you will get that, I will go for them."

"I will stay here and answer for it that you have the paper," said Tom earnestly. "When can you bring them here?"

"By the time the sun sets to-morrow," was the reply of Wild Cat. "The Jicarillas will be here then, and we can settle our old battle at once. Can the white friend be sure that he will keep his eyes open, in the mean time?"

"I can, and I will," said Tom resolutely. "I will wait here, and find out all I can."

"But after the sun rises, you must find your friends," the Indian interrupted. "We shall not be enough to beat the Jicarillas and the yellow men too. You must attend to the one, and we will master the others."

"So be it," said Tom; and with that they crept off through the woods, till they reached the secret place where they had left their horses

when Thunderbolt greeted them with a low, impatient whinny, that made Wild Cat say:

"He makes too much noise, brother. He must be taken away. Even the muzzle will not quiet him."

"Then why don't you take him away yourself, and ride to your nation, while I take your pony?" Tom asked him.

"That may be the best way, brother," the Indian answered gravely, "but he will fight me. He is not used to the red-man on his back, and we can afford no fights now. The best thing we can do is to go away together, and when you are on the plain, no one can catch you. The horse will spoil everything, if he be left to call to the other horses."

The advice appeared to be sound, and the two horses were led out by the secret path.

As long as Thunderbolt had a companion, he was quiet enough, and they managed to get him out on the plain, without exciting any alarm among the Mexican watchmen, though they could hear them talking to each other on post, in the still night air.

The horses were at last brought out, and the two friends mounted and walked them quietly away to the north.

When they had got fairly out of hearing of the camp, they separated, Tom going by a long circuit to the south, while Wild Cat took the route to the Indian Terri ory and his friends.

Thunderbolt was impatient to be off, and Tom gave him his head for a good stretch.

The young rancher knew the country well enough, and had made up his mind to go as far as he could, to meet his friends, and into camp in some *motte*, where the stallion would be safe from disturbance.

He rode some five miles, till he found the place he wanted, just in the route that his friends must pursue, if they were on the trail; and of this he had no doubt.

He had brought away from the ranch, when he went on the pursuit with his cowboys, some grain for the horse; for he knew that the animal could not be depended on, as could the ponies, to make good work on grass alone. The last of this he took from behind the saddle, and fed to Thunderbolt, in the thickest part of the *motte*.

The stallion went at his feed with a will, that showed his severe work had not taken away his appetite, and soon quieted down and went to sleep by the foot of a tree, Tom remaining on the watch for some time, but finally giving way to the influence of fatigue.

How long he slept he did not know, but he was awakened by Thunderbolt neighing loudly, struggling to get loose; and saw, from the glow in the east, that it was the dawn of day.

Rising from his bed of leaves, he saw, in the distance, a troop of horsemen, coming over the plain at a canter.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCOUTING-PARTY.

TOM managed to quiet his horse by patting and stroking it, but he had to clutch the nostrils of Thunderbolt before the animal would stop its signals of welcome to those of its own kind, that it saw approaching.

Field could not tell whether the approaching force was friendly or the reverse, for the light was not yet strong enough to distinguish them clearly; but from the direction in which they came, he judged they must be his own people.

He got the horse saddled before the light was full, and, by the time he had mounted and was ready to go out, the approaching party was not three-quarters of a mile off.

He had no fear of being captured, as long as he was on Thunderbolt's back, so he rode out of the *motte*, with no effort at concealment, and the opposite party immediately halted.

He could not yet see exactly who they were; but he could distinguish figures, and noticed that a few men dashed out from the main line, and were coming for him at a gallop.

He turned Thunderbolt at once, and put the animal to a hand-gallop, to gain time; for the actions of the force ahead of him were very doubtful, and he could not tell exactly what to make of them.

He had been separated from his friends the day before, when his own party had scattered in disorder, and had the impression that he should see at least a hundred, if these were his friends. But the length of the line in his front precluded that idea; for there were not over fifty in all, and he suspected that a scouting-party of the Mexicans, from the corral, might be out.

His pursuers set up a yell as they saw him turn his horse, and began to fire, but the distance was too great, and the bullets whistled harmlessly behind him, and dropped into the earth, thud after thud; till the shooters seemed to realize that the fire was useless, and abandoned the chase as far as that was concerned.

They put their ponies to their utmost speed, but Tom knew that they could never catch the thoroughbred, so he gave himself no further concern about them, but rode on at an easy gallop, till the increasing light enabled him to see the figures behind him, when he turned in his saddle, and beheld the well-known broad hats of the Mexicans.

The sight gave him something of a shock, for it showed him that his foes were by no means asleep now, whatever they might have been in time past.

They were on the watch for the coming of their own foes, and if the cowboys came after them, they were not likely to have a chance to surprise them, as they had done before.

He regretted, at the moment, in spite of the speed and endurance of his horse, that he had not chosen a less troublesome animal, for then he might have found out what the enemy were at in their own camp.

It was too late to repine, however, and he turned his horse again as the enemy were coming on, with the object of drawing them near enough for him to use his own rifle.

He felt sufficient confidence in his superiority with the weapon to be able to defy any that he knew to be in the ranks of his enemies, and poised it as they came on, eyeing the approaching foe with a view to pick out the leader, if they had one.

There were about a dozen in the party, and the foremost had a dress glittering with gold-lace, from which Tom suspected him to be the dandified Mexican who had excited his curiosity the night before.

And somehow, just as in the case of Hank the Nailer, the chivalrous young man had not the heart to fire on one whom he half-suspected to be of the oppositesex.

Without attempting to hit the leader, he drew a bead on the next in line, and had the pleasure of seeing the man drop from his horse, as the smoke cleared away.

The shot elicited a volley from the galloping men, but the bullets whistled wide of the mark, all but the shot sent by the dandy Mexican.

Tom saw him take his aim as he rode, and the flash of his piece was followed by a sharp thud and a stinging pain in his own shoulder, as the bullet grazed him and tore a hole in his jacket.

The sting angered Tom so that he leveled his repeater once more, this time with a steady aim at the dandy Mexican, and fired.

As the smoke blinded him for a moment, he saw the Mexican dive over the side of his horse, and thought he was hit, but the other swung up into his saddle with a shrill yell, and came on again, harder than before.

It was the first time Tom had seen the trick of dropping at the flash, so neatly performed, and he forgot all about his foe being a possible woman in his natural pride of marksmanship.

Not hesitating a moment, he leveled again, and fired a second shot, at which the other dived on the same side. Then, as he rose to the saddle the third time, Tom fired another shot, under which the dandy Mexican fell from the horse, and stumbled as he tried to rise again.

At last he had been hit, and the shot forced an immediate pause in the pursuit, for the Mexicans seemed to be unable to advance, without a leader of the fiery character of the young dandy, who had deceived Hank the Nailer so often, when he thought himself most secure of the shot.

Tom rode leisurely away at a slow trot, and the Mexicans gathered round their fallen leader.

Tom, looking back, saw that they had lifted him on his horse again, and were leading the animal off, and he judged he must have hurt the rider severely.

He had taken no definite aim at any part of Miguel's body, in the haste of his shot; but had taken him as he came up, and judged that the shot must have struck somewhere in the lower part of the body, if not in one of the legs.

But, for the present he was safe from any further pursuit, and he watched his foes as they clustered round their leader, till at last they took the direction of the corral and rode away.

Tom remained where he was, and then followed them to the end of their course, keeping on the highest ground he could find, and away from the timber, so as to give his crafty enemies no chance to catch him by surprise.

Every now and then he would turn and look to the south, in the hope of seeing the well-known figures of the cowboys, but, as the sun rose up in the east and the light of day became universal, there were no signs of anything but the enemy, and he began to feel down-hearted.

From a swell which commanded a view of the corral, from a long distance away, he could see that it was black with cattle, and knew that they could not stay there beyond another night; for the place was only calculated for about three thousand head, and at least ten thousand were in sight, which would eat up all the grass, in a very short time.

It was while he was gazing at the corral, that Thunderbolt began to neigh once more, warning him that more horses were coming toward him.

CHAPTER XXII.

FRIENDS AT LAST.

New comers they were; but at first he could not see them, so far were they from him.

Remembering that the scent of the horse had probably warned it, he turned to windward.

The breeze was blowing freshly from the southeast at the time. Far away on the horizon, in that direction, he saw dots, moving along on the grass, and knew that they must be horsemen.

He waited where he was for some time, and the dots grew plainer as the horsemen advanced, till he could distinguish the separate figures and count them as they came.

There were, as near as he could judge, about fifty horsemen in the party, and he wondered who they could be, till he bethought him it was quite likely Hank might have sent back the stolen ponies, under a guard, while he pursued the cattle, with another detachment of the men under his orders.

And there were at least a hundred Mexicans in the corral, with seventy Indians coming to help them, while the Kiowas would not be up, till the setting of the sun.

As he thought of this, he rode toward the strangers, and as they got closer, he perceived that it was, as he had thought, his own friends at last.

This point settled, he waited for them, for he did not know at what moment he might want the best speed of the stallion, and in the mean time the horse might as well have some grass, to make amends for the scant forage of the night before.

So he staked out Thunderbolt, with a bobble on one foreleg and the opposite hind-leg, in case he should drag the stake and try to escape.

The horse set to work at the grass within his reach with an avidity that showed how hungry he was, and Tom kept a keen watch on the country round for fear any lurking foe might be concealed there.

The dark dots continued to advance, and at last he could distinguish the figure of his friend, Hank the Nailer, in front, by the horse he rode—a so-called "clay-bank," with a black mane and tail.

By this time Thunderbolt had eaten so much that he began to be uneasy and try to pull the stake to get what he thought were choicer bits of grass, so Tom loosed and mounted him, to ride away.

When his friends were within a mile, he rode into full view, and was saluted with a yell that came plainly to his ears.

A few minutes later he was in the midst of the cowboys, and Hank was shaking his hands, tears in his honest eyes, saying:

"Tom, ye villain, we thought they'd wiped ye aout; but we wouldn't rest till we faound ye, dead or alive. I couldn't have faced Di, if I hadn't faound ye, boy."

"Oh, I'm all right," the young man said. "I got separated from the rest in the stampede, and found Wild Cat. We rode away from the front of the Greasers, and they were so busy with the stock that they didn't notice us; but let us get ahead of them to the corral."

"And where air they naow?" asked Hank, eagerly.

"In the corral; and they will wait there till they get a reinforcement of the Jicarillas—"

"The Jicarillas!" echoed Hank, surprised.

"Air them skunks raound hyar?"

Tom told him the story of what he had discovered the night before, and what Wild Cat had told him about the so-called "Squaw Chief." The sheriff listened to it with a very thoughtful face. When Tom had finished, Punch Burleson put in the remark:

"Say, boys, I've heard of that Squaw Chief afore this. He ain't no more a gal than any of us, from all I've heard tell; but he's enough to fool the Old Boy himself, when he gits his woman duds on."

"Why, what do you know about him or her, whichever it is?" asked Colonel Callahan, who seemed interested also.

Punch put his hand in his pocket and took a chew of tobacco before he answered, and then he said to them:

"Waal, boys, it were a long time ago when I fust heard the story; but I'll tell it ye as it was told to me, while the hosses is feeding. This ain't half a bad place to feed, is it?"

The sheriff took the hint, and ordered the men to dismount and feed their horses, while they took their own breakfast.

When they were all eating, Punch told the story to the ranchers, as they gathered round him.

"Ye see, boys," he began, "it were in the war, which most of ye never was in, 'cause ye warn't old enough; but them as was in it, though we fit on the losin' side, seed some remarkable things daown hyar in Texas. Ye see, while the fitin' were at the wu't everywhere else, hyar in Texas we didn't hev much to do. The armies was a long way off. While they was a-shootin' at each other at Vicksburg and the rest of them places ye've all heard of, we, in Texas, was runnin' wagons and teams into Mexico, and makin' money hand over fist as the sayin' is. I warn't into the best of it, 'cause I were jest that fool that nothen would do me but to go and jine Lee's army, and git a darned sight more fitin' than I hed any idee of, when I started. But we used ter hyar all sorts of stories abaout it, when we was

starvin', raound ole Virginny,' and the eend of the matter were, when we began to see the old thing were a-goin' to bu'st, a lot of us Texans, we jest lit aout, afore discharge papers come, and took aour hosses with us, all the way hyar. When we got hyar, the war were nigh over; but the fun, runnin' cargoes over the line, were jest at the best, and I had a chance, with some of the rest of the boys, to git some stuff and go with a train to Durango. We hed only one trouble on the way, and that war them pesky Injuns. The very same Jicarillas that Tom hyar tells of. Ye see, boys, they've held the passes of the maountains, fur nigh on a thaous-and y'ars, the Greasers say—I dunno haow true that is, but I give it for what it's worth—and they got inter the habit of takin' toll of all the folks that goes that way, so they live and don't do no work. Waal, the Greasers, as ye all know, air a lot of pesky caowards, and they paid the cash fur years, and never squealed. But when we boys got daown thar, and was used to fittin', it warn't quite what we was goin' to take, and say nothen about."

"What did they want?" asked Tom.

"Darned if the pesky critters didn't want ten per cent. of all the goods we kerried, afore they'd say we c'd pass. And that riz the dander of the boys, one time, when a old red son-of-a-gun come daown to us, and we camped at the bank of a stream, in the Sierry Madry, jest at the border. He comes daown, as lordly as a darned old king, and says he wants his dust, or we c'dn't pass. And he all alone, 'cept fur a boy, looked like he'd b'en spiled in the raisin', and never washed hisself sence he were born. Darn a Injun, anyway! Greasers is bad enough; but a pesky Jicarilla, he's 'nuff to knock ye daown, when ye git the wind of him. So we up and tole him to go to blazes, and take the boy with him."

"And what happened then?" asked Tom, seeing that Punch paused.

The Texan's face grew grave, as he replied.

"Waal, not much, then. The old cuss rid away, and never said a word; and we went on with aour trip.

"We kep' aour eyes skinned, I kin tell ye, all the way to Durango, fur fear they might be hidin' in the canons; but we never see hide or ha'r of 'em, and we sold aour goods well and got a good profit. Then we got Greaser goods to take hum, and that's where we were fooled."

"How?" asked Tom again.

"Haow! I'd like to know what ye call haow! The darned cusses caught us in the big canyon, when the rocks was a thousand foot high on each side, and thar they begin to roll big stuns, daown on us, till they'd killed every darned mule in the aoutfit. We fit, all we could, but it warn't no use. We c'dn't see a darned one of them, and they kep' on rollin' the stuns daown. Then we lit aout of that canyon, lively, I tell you, and what d'ye s'pose the skunks did?"

"What?" asked more than one.

"Why, they jest stood at the top of the rocks, and laffed, fit to split, at us, as we ran. And when we got to the eend of the canyon, thar were a buil row of 'em, in a breastwork like a wall, and they with thar rifles p'inted, ready to give it to us. Tell ye what it is, boys, I fit at many a tough scrimmage in Virginny; but that were jest the toughest I ever strook. The imps fired, and we charged. We made shift to git through, arter a fashion, but I reckin we didn't hit a darned one of 'em; fur they never stirred from thar breastwork, that lay over the place whar we had to go through, and shot at us as we scraped by. The eend of the matter were that I got aout afoot, and half-starved, arter wanderin' in the maountain fur a week: and thar was jest three more, got aout alive. And it's my b'ief that the Injuns let 'em go to skeer the rest, and tell 'em all the stories about the fight. Tell ye what: arter that, thar never war a carryvan went through thar, that didn't pay daown the dust, whenever that old chief come. I went through thar twice, arter that, and the old cuss knowed me when he see'd me, fur he kinder smiled to hisself, and says to me: 'Aha! el caballero de la stampida! aha Buenos dias, senior. Che paga usted, para cavallos, esta dia?' The old villain meant to laff at me for losin' my hoss, and runnin' the way I did, but I didn't let on I remembered him, and he didn't say no more."

"But what about the Squaw Chief?" asked one of the cowboys.

Punch nodded.

"I'm a-comin' to that, boys. It were on the last trip we made, afore the peace stopped the biz, that we h'ard old Agostino, the chief, had got a darter or a son, no man c'd sw'ar which, and he'd adopted the boy or gal, whichever it were, 'cause he, or she, were jest the prettiest kid any one had ever see'd afore. That was all we h'ard; but I see'd the kid, fur he used to take it along with him when he come daown on the carryvans, fur his shar' of the plunder.

"It were the sweetest little thing ye ever see, with big eyes, jest like stars, only they was black as a dark night, and the kid had long curls, as black as the eyes or blacker, and the

cheekiest ways of anything I ever see'd. It c'd sw'ar like a pirate, a'ready, in Greaser, though it warn't more'n three year old, and do all sorts of tricks, like a circus clown. Folks said it war the child of some circus feller and gal, that old Agostino had picked up in the city of Mexico, whar he used to go, oncet a y'ar, to cut a dash; but I dunno about that. Then I didn't hyar no more about the kid, till twelve year later, when there war a story that a new chief had b'en 'lected by the Jicarillas, that they called 'Bona Vista Miguel'—that is 'handsome-sight Mick'; ye know, boys, 'cause he were so pretty. Then there were a officer of the cavalry regiment, what were a great scout, arter the Injuns, when they used to make raids over the border, and he had a fight with this Bona Vista Mick, and he swore Mick were a woman, fur he come into the camp like one, all togged up, and made love to the officer, and got him ravin', the way the darned critter acted. And the eend of it were, Mick only come to spy the place; and the fine West Pointer, who thought he knowed all about the thing, got left in the maountings, with nary a boss, and had to foot it back, all the way to Braonsville, or one of the forts, I disremember which it were, and he laid it all to Mick. Then there was them as used to say he come raound in Texas, dressed up like a lady, and rid into San Antonio to spy, when they had a drive, and every time that gal was seen, there was sure to be a reg'lar raid, not ten days arter."

"She used ter pass fur a widdler, that had a place nigh San Antonio, but no one c'd fix the man or woman; he or she kep' it so still, and took so many new names, when she come a-spyin'. And we hain't h'ard so much of her, fur years; fur she used to raid around the southern tier of the State; and naow, if she's up hyar, we've got a dusty old time to look fur, boys, and don't you make no mistake."

And Punch took a fresh chew, and settled himself to resaddle his horse.

As for Tom, the story filled him with strange thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CURIOUS MANUEVER.

WHILE the ponies were feeding, the men were keeping a sharp lookout for the Mexicans in the corral, whom they could see with the naked eye as black spots among the cattle, and, with the glass, could distinguish, as they moved about.

The swell, whereon Tom had taken his place, was the highest for miles around, and commanded a view of many leagues.

Away off in the northwest, they could see the dim blue outlines of the foot-hills of the Sierra Madre, where they slope into the plain, and put forth spurs between which the rivers find their way into the prairie.

From these mountains the Jicarillas were expected, and from the swell it was probable the cowboys would be able to see them as they came; for the country beyond was flat and devoid of cover, save the *mottes*.

Hank the Nailer told Tom that he was well satisfied with the ground, and proposed to stay there for awhile, to see what the Mexicans would do. Obviously it was not policy, with the inferior force at their command, to try an open assault on the enemy, while it was pretty certain that if any attempt were made to take the cattle out under their eyes, it could be frustrated by the annoyance that the cowboys were sure to give them.

A stampede of the herd, out on the prairie, could hardly result other than in the animals taking the home track, and, for their appearance on the plain, it was decided to wait.

Then the horses of the cowboys were turned out to pasture, under a horse-guard, while the men went to sleep, leaving a strong guard to watch for the movements of the enemy, headed by Top Notch Tom, who had had a good night's rest. The men who had come with Hank the Nailer were tired, for they had ridden all night, and had had little sleep for a long time before that.

When the guard was set, Tom noticed that some of the men were nodding at their posts, and he allowed them to take short naps, one by one, seated at the side of their saddles, while he walked round the place, glass in hand, keeping a vigilant watch on the corral and every place where there was the least chance for the wily foe to approach unobserved.

He had the advantage of knowing the country thoroughly, and thus was enabled to understand what was going on, better than another.

He had been on post for about two hours, and the sleepers had all had their turn, and were rousing each other to resume their tours of duty, when his attention was called to a movement in the corral, at the point where the path led down to the bottom of the ravine, where the ponies had made their escape, two nights before, when Hank led them out.

He watched very closely and saw a number of men clustered there, while, one by one, others descended, and led their horses with them.

Divining that there was some trick on foot and that it must have some connection with the

camp, he roused his men from their slumbers, and had the horses, which were scattered rather too widely, driven in, while the sleepers, all over the camp, were waked up, rubbing their eyes and asking what was the matter.

There was no alarm, but the ponies were brought in quietly, and the freshest that had been led along were saddled.

Then the cowboys drove the rest behind the cover of the swell, out of sight from the corral, and awaited developments.

Tom, who had lived in that part of the country for a year, knew where the ends of the ravine came up into the plain on either side.

He located the spots with the glass, and set a sharp-eyed man to watch one of them, while he directed his glass on the other.

He expected that he would see, before long, the figures of men and horses coming out of the depths of the earth, and the question was, at which end they would come.

He was all alone on the top of the swell, and lay down, so that his figure could not be seen against the sky-line.

The man who had taken the other end of the ravine for his gaze, was lying not far off, but still more hidden; for he had taken the cover of a bush that grew there, to hide his head.

For nearly an hour they waited in silence, and then Tom saw something moving at the end of the ravine which he had chosen for his watch.

It was the opposite to that by which the cowboys had stolen out two nights before.

First came the head of a man, moving along slowly, and Tom, through the glass, could see that he had his face turned toward the hill on which the young rancher lay.

And he saw more than that; for the features of the man, though not plain yet, were under the gay hat, with the heavy gold cord, which he had noticed on the dandy Mexican.

Clearly Tom had not bit him so badly, the time he had shot him, that the young desperado could not get out again.

He watched, and after a cautious survey, the Mexican came forth from the shelter of the ravine and showed himself plainly.

Tom eyed him carefully through the glass, and looked for signs of wounds about Miguel, but the array of the young dandy was as gay as ever, and he sat his horse as if nothing had occurred to hurt him.

While Tom was watching him, the man at the other end of the line called out to him:

"They're a-comin' out, Cap."

Tom shifted his glass to the quarter named, and saw another party coming out of the other end of the ravine, headed by a tall man, in whom he recognized Berkeley by his bulk.

Then he saw what was the object of the sally.

The enemy had divined that the elevated knoll was the key of the situation, as commanding a view of the whole country, and were coming to drive them off by a concerted attack on two sides.

Tom slipped back to where the sheriff was waiting with Punch Burleson, both half-asleep, for they were the sort of men that took every moment of rest they could while they had the chance.

He roused Hank, told him what he had seen, and the sheriff went up with him to take a long look at the situation.

He saw that both bodies of the enemy had by this time got out of the shelter of the ravine and numbered about fifty in each body, enough to make the odds two to one if they were allowed to unite in the attack.

He turned to Punch, asking:

"Waal, what d'ye think, Punch?"

Punch turned his eyes first to one then the other of the parties, and said briefly:

"We kin whip 'em aout of thar butes."

"But haow air we to do it?"

"Git the boys ready, and make a charge as soon as the cusses git well under the hill, hyar. It ain't to be s'posed they'll strike jest at the same time, and they can't see each other while they stays thar on the plain. Let the fu'st come nigh us, and whip that. Then go fur the other one, and ye'll see the hull aoutfit stampede."

The advice was so good that they determined to follow it.

The cowboys were drawn up in line behind the crest of the hill, by Punch's advice, while the spare ponies were sent back out of gunshot to feed in a hollow, where they would be out of danger of stampede and protected by a little *motte* of timber, which would shelter them perfectly from stray bullets that might drop over the hill if the enemy assaulted on the front.

Tom and his assistant returned to the top of the hill to watch the proceedings of the enemy, and saw that the two parties were making a wide circuit.

They watched them, till they had gone nearly out of sight, and had gotten behind the line of the hill on which their watchers were, when it occurred to Tom that they might not be coming to attack that way at all, and he went to communicate his suspicions to Hank and Punch.

The ex-Confederate went to the top of the hill, and took the glass to scan the plain care-

* "Aha! the gentlemen of the stampede! Good day, sir. What are you paying for horses, to-day?"

fully. The distant parties of the enemy were still to be seen, like snakes, winding over the green grass, and they had taken a course to the east, so as to get behind the hill in which the cowboys were posted.

This movement lasted for near an hour longer, when they altered their direction, and began to come straight toward the place where the cowboys were gathered, by the rear.

They were still ten miles off, and the middle of the afternoon was come, but the way in which they came showed that they had some plan by which they hoped to achieve success.

Punch seemed to be uneasy as he saw them, and he observed to Tom:

"Looks like they was waitin' fur some one; don't it, boys? If them pesky Jicarillas comes daown on the other side, we'd be in a kinder hole; wouldn't we?"

The idea seemed to strike Hank unfavorably; for he frowned as he looked at the distant foe and said, half to himself:

"If I thought that—"

"What would ye do?" asked the rancher. Hank smote his hand on his thigh.

"I'd go arter them, and sp'ile their game."

"Very best thing ye c'd do," remarked Punch. "If thar was any way we c'd hide aourselves, and git on 'em by surprise, we c'd sp'ile it, so bad, they'd never try it on again."

Tom reflected on his knowledge of the country and suddenly exclaimed, as if he had caught the idea:

"Why not go to the corral ourselves, while they are away? They cannot have much force there now, for I have counted at least a hundred men in the two parties. They can have but a dozen or so there, perhaps only the guard, and we can take the place and hold it."

Punch slapped him on the back, with the delighted exclamation:

"Tom, boy! ye ought to have fit in the war. Ye'd ha' made a fu'st-class calvary ossifer! That's the ticket, and they can't stop us naow, fur the life of 'em."

Here Hank, the Nailer, interrupted:

"But s'pose that's the very thing they want? It ain't to be s'posed that they don't know haow many men they've left behind them, and they wouldn't go off this way, if they didn't expect us to fall into the trap and go right into thar corral. No; boys, it saounds well; but the boys don't go inter that place, while I'm sheriff of this caounty, and this is my posse."

Punch endeavored to persuade him, but it was all in vain. The sheriff admitted that he had no experience of warfare as had Punch, but he refused to go into the corral, and said that he preferred to stay out on the plain, where he could see what he was about.

So they determined to hold their elevated position, which was only a mile and a half from the corral, and wait for further developments.

Two hours passed; the sun had declined to within a few degrees of the horizon, and still there was no symptom of the attack from the Mexican; when Tom, at the top of the hill, detected more moving spots in the plain beyond the corral. As the sun glittered from their weapons, he saw that they were Indians, with plumes in their head-dresses, and that they were coming from the direction of the mountains, in a force that looked larger than his own. He communicated his discovery to the sheriff, and Hank said:

"That must be the Jicarillas. See, naow, if we'd ha' penned aourselves up in that old corral, whar would we ha' b'en? Those fellers are used to fighting afoot, and they would ha' b'en at thar best, daown in that ravine. Naow we kin fight or run, which we please, and all they kin do is to take the stock and put fur the maountings. It's time we started, and give 'em the right of way."

"Right of way!" echoed Punch, indignantly. "Ye ain't goin' to give up the game, air ye?"

The sheriff smiled.

"I've b'en a-thinkin', all day," he said, "that we was a-goin' to bring them cattle hum, and naow I'm sure of it; dead sure. You let me alone, boys. I'm sheriff, and I'm the man that's got to give bonds. We're a-goin' to skip naow."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SURPRISE.

THE meaning of the sheriff became clear, when he ordered the men to mount their horses, and led the way, himself, from the top of the hill that had seemed their coign of vantage, as long as light lasted.

The sun was nearly at the horizon when he abandoned the position and took the path down toward the corral.

Tom, doubting but obedient, and Punch Burleson, grumbling but submissive, followed him, and the herd of ponies was driven after.

The sheriff led the way, as if he had selected the road beforehand, and after going straight toward the corral, for about half a mile, turned sharp to the east, and made a circuit round it, to get in the way of the advancing party of Jicarillas.

By the time he had rounded the corral, the

sun was down and darkness was over the face of the plain, only relieved by the stars.

Then Tom began to see what his object was, and even Punch Burleson grumbled no more.

The ponies were turned loose behind a distant *motte*, where they would be out of the way of both parties, and left to take care of themselves, for every man would be wanted.

Then the sheriff dismounted his men in front of a screen of timber that straggled over the prairie, right in the line of the advancing Indians, where they had last been seen, and ordered the horses tied to trees, while the men waited for the coming of the enemy.

They had an hour to wait; an hour distinguished by intense silence, while the men sat down on the grass, waiting.

At last they heard the tramping of horses and voices of men, not far off and Hank said to his men, in a low tone:

"No firin' till I give the fu'st shot, and then only one volley. We can't throw away a shot."

They all lay down in the grass, completely bidden, and the forms of horsemen came over the swell before them, riding in a long file, with the plumes of their head-dresses relieved against the sky.

On they came, unsuspecting of danger, and had gotten within easy range, when the watchers heard the gallop of horses from the other side, and loud shouts of men coming.

The Indians in front halted and clustered into a group, as if alarmed by the noise, and Hank fired, at once, into the densest part of the group, his shot being the signal for a volley that lasted for near half a minute, as the cowboys worked the levers of their rifles, as fast as they could, as long as an Indian remained in sight.

The effect of the volley was tremendous; for it seemed to knock the horsemen right and left, and they fled in the wildest disorder, without firing a shot in return.

No sooner had they disappeared over the crest of the hill, than the sheriff rose and called to his men:

"Stop firing, and git to your critters."

The command was not strictly military, but it was understood as well as if he had used the regulation words, and the cowboys ran to the ponies behind them, and were in the saddle in a space of time that would have seemed marvelously short to a regular officer.

Then the sheriff, in a low but distinct tone, said to the men, who crowded round him, silent and attentive:

"Foller me in a string, and don't make any noise."

Again the command was understood perfectly, and the men followed him, as he rode off across the plain, keeping in the hollow, and swept off to meet the men he had heard coming up before. They had halted, whoever they were, and he could bear a great confusion, as if they were trying to get into some sort of order, in the darkness.

The wary sheriff slackened his pace and took the walk, as he led his men round to the north, out of the way of the meeting of the two bodies. He had thrown the Indians into confusion and they had fled, but he knew that they would soon come back after their friends, and that the second collision was not likely to result as well as the first.

So Hank took his men straight out, at right angles to the line of the Indians' advance, and drew them up in silence behind another *motte* of timber, one of those scattered all over the country.

Then the men were dismounted again, and the ponies taken into the timber.

The edge of the wood was lined with men, and Hank asked Tom:

"Now, will you go out and find what those fellers are doing? You have a horse that can keep out of the way if need be, or I wouldn't ask ye; but I don't want to be taken by surprise."

Tom's only answer was to mount his horse and ride away, into the darkness, toward the enemy.

He could still hear the noise of voices that revealed their vicinity, and kept warily out of their way till he had escaped from the place where he thought they could hear him, and got on the track of the Indians.

He knew that he was near them by the way the earth was trampled up in his front, and rode along with caution for near a mile, till he saw the head of a man against the sky-line on the top of a neighboring swell, and knew that it was one of the Indians.

Then, of course, he halted in the bottom, and felt thankful that he had not run on the whole body in the dark.

Whether he had been seen or heard he could not yet tell, but he had little hope of having escaped the keen senses of the savages, and he remained perfectly still.

For some time he was unmolested, and heard nothing, while the Indian, whose head had come over the top of the hill, had disappeared.

And then Thunderbolt began to fidget and try to neigh, in a manner that showed his rider that other horses were near.

The instinct of the stallion had its advantages as well as disadvantages.

Tom knew that an enemy was near, and turned the horse where his eyes showed that he expected company.

Soon he heard the noise of hoofs trampling on the grass, and knew that several horsemen were approaching him.

He was down in the shadow of a swell, and the trunks of two trees, growing near together, covered his body, when he saw something moving at a few hundred yards from him, in the same direction he had heard the feet of horses.

Without waiting for any further developments, he raised his rifle and was about to fire at the place where the rustling and stamping was going on, when a horseman came out into full view in the starlight.

He was an Indian in garb, and was looking round him cautiously, crouched on the front of his saddle, as if on the scout, when something in his appearance struck Tom with amazement, as he recognized the figure of Wild Cat, by a peculiar war-bonnet that the Kiowa had, when he went off.

Wild Cat had come back, but who was with him? Had he brought his tribe or not?

To settle the question, Tom gave his horse's head a little more freedom, and Thunderbolt immediately neighed loudly.

Wild Cat did not seem astonished at the noise, but turned his pony that way and rode straight up to Tom, with his hand raised, open, in the Indian signal of amity.

As soon as he had reached Tom, he said, in a tone of great caution:

"The horse must be taken back. My tribe are still far away, and the Jicarillas are near. I have come with Black Wolf, and we have found Fawn Foot. He is here, and he knows where the cattle are, that were stolen. Come with me."

Tom was too much accustomed to rely on the Indian to hesitate a moment, and he followed the other to the place from whence he had made his appearance, where he found two Indians waiting, in one of whom he recognized an old friend, in the person of Black Wolf, and in the other the young warrior who had given them so much trouble by carrying off the cattle.

They said nothing but the usual "How," and the four started off into the plains, keeping in the hollows between the swells, till they had ridden a mile or more, when Wild Cat spoke out:

"Now we can talk. Where are the rest of your friends?"

Tom gave him an outline of what had happened, and the Kiowa listened attentively.

When Tom had finished he said:

"They have done well, but the Jicarillas have enough to kill them all. The white men are in the *motte* which commands the entrance to the corral, and they will be attacked tonight. If they can hold their position till morning, they are safe; but my tribe will not be up till then."

"What is the reason they are not here now?" Tom asked.

"We could not get them together. The warriors were out on the plains, herding the cattle of the tribe, and we could not get word to them till the setting of the sun. I came ahead to warn you all. The Jicarillas will be able to get the cattle out; but before they reach the mountain we shall be there. We must get your friends out, before they are attacked. Can you go there straight?"

"I can," said Tom, pointing in the direction in which they were, for he had kept it in his mind all the time.

"Then let us go there," said the Indian briskly, suiting the action to the word, and riding off at a fast pace.

They arrived near the place where Tom knew his friends were located; but before they could quite reach it, became aware that others were on the move.

The tramping of horses came from the direction of the corral, with the jingling of bridle-chains and stirrups that told of the rapid advance of a body of horsemen.

Before the Indian could get near enough to the wood lined with cowboys, to announce his presence, the forms of a number of horsemen came in sight, and charged down on the *motte* with loud yells, while a fierce fire was opened on them in return.

The spitting flashes leaped out from the timber, and the charge was repulsed; but the horsemen hovered round in such a dense mass that it was clear they intended to keep up the fight, if they dared, till they drove out the defenders of the wood.

For nearly five minutes of incessant fighting, the Mexicans rushed at the wood again and again, and then fled, as they had done before, in wild confusion.

The moment they did so, the Kiowa started his pony, yelling his war-cry as he came, and followed by Top Notch Tom and the other Indians.

They all cried together, and the men in the timber seemed to recognize the cry, for they forbore to fire till Tom came close enough to be known; and the next minute they were all in the shelter of the timber, where a hurried

consultation took place between Hank the Nailer and Wild Cat, in whom the sheriff had great faith, which resulted in Hank giving the order:

"Get your critters, boys. We're goin' out."

The men responded with a yell, that was echoed by the Mexicans in the distance, who fancied the cowboys were exulting over their defeat; but they ventured on no further attack, being busily engaged in getting into proper order, for they had been thrown into great confusion by their repulse.

As for the cowboys, they sallied out with their ponies, at the side of the timber away from the Mexicans, and started over the prairie to the north, as if they were abandoning the place for good, to the great astonishment of the robbers, who, as soon as they saw what had happened, set up a counter yell, and started after them full speed.

But this was just what Wild Cat wanted, for he knew that the ponies of his party were the freshest, and he told Hank to let the enemy come up, if they wanted, and to keep up a running fight.

Inside of five miles the chase was given up, and the Mexicans returned to the corral. The way was left open for their allies to join them.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE FOOT-HILLS.

AWAY off at the foot of the mountains, that run, more or less irregularly, through the western part of Texas, putting out spurs and valleys, all the way from the Staked Plains to the Rio Grande, lies the route pursued by the Indian raiders from time immemorial, as they swoop down on the country, or by which they carry off their plunder.

In the mountains they are safe, because they know every pass; and they cannot be pursued by regular troops without great trouble and the loss of many horses, on account of the scarcity of water, and the fact that the Indians are the almost exclusive possessors of the secret of where to find it.

At the foot of one of these spurs, two days after the fight at the secret corral, a group of Indians of the Kiowa tribe was stationed, the men resting by their horses, while a large drove of cattle with the marks of the "Screw-Worm Ranch" on their tawny hides, was feeding peacefully on the green herbage that lay on the bank of a small stream, running out of the foot of the nearest declivity from a spring.

Before the mountains, the plain was perfectly flat, and bare of everything but the short dry bunch-grass, that forms the principal subsistence of the cattle of the Western States, outside of the rolling-prairie belt of Texas.

The cattle were thin, as if they had been driven fast and far, to get to the place where they were, but they were doing the best they knew how to make up lost time by feeding steadily.

Their guards were only about half a dozen in number, and one of them was stationed on the top of the nearest foot-hill, looking out over the plain, far away.

His eyes were fixed on a small eminence, that looked like a mole-hill on the flat, hardly higher than one of the little eminences that mark the site of a prairie marmot's burrow.

Nevertheless the watcher knew that the little hill was a mountain, several hundred feet high: one of those singular bluffs that stud the western plains under the name of "buttes," and make conspicuous objects for many miles around.

The butte in question was, in reality, twenty miles away; and the Indian watcher knew that on its top was stationed another watcher, for whose signal he was waiting.

At last it came, in the shape of three puffs of smoke, that resembled black balls thrown into the air, when the watcher raised a long, shrill cry, and the men on guard below rose into activity.

The cattle were driven in at once, and off from the foot of the hill, around a neighboring spur, to a place where they would be sheltered from view in the plain, and where the herdsmen would be unseen also.

Here they were allowed to feed in the valley, though the accommodation was rather crowded for their numbers, while the watchman on the hill above continued his watch.

His keen eyes, trained on the vast plains of the West, soon perceived dots moving on the yellow, dusty plain below, which shaped themselves into a string of horsemen, coming straight toward the valley.

He waited for some time, till the advancing dots could be distinguished into horse and rider, when he sounded his signal again to the men in the valley below.

At the signal, they set to work at the cattle, and drove them off up the valley, to a place where the rocks approached each other, so as to make a canyon down which poured a stream of water that joined the other and made quite a respectable rivulet in the plain below.

There was some difficulty in getting the cattle into the stream, but it was finally arranged, and up the canyon they went, till it opened into a

sort of natural amphitheater, that would just hold the animals, but where they would have nothing to eat.

Arrived there, the guards took their post at the entrance, and lay down behind a low, irregular breastwork of loose rocks, that had been constructed there in former times, when they remained tranquil.

In the mean time, the watcher on the hill above kept the advancing men in his eye, and as soon as they had come within a mile or so, he left his post and vanished behind the hill.

Where he went to was not to be seen, but the men in the plain continued to advance, till they developed into a body of horsemen about two hundred strong, composed of Mexicans and Indians, in about equal proportions, followed, at a distance of a mile or more, by a great herd of cattle, which were being driven hard, their tongues hanging out of their mouths, dripping with foam, while the men at the flanks of the body were plying their long whips unmercifully, in the style of Mexican vaqueros and Indians, all the world over, urging the exhausted beasts on.

As they neared the foot of the mountain, several horsemen rode out from the advance at a gallop, and came to the ground lately vacated by the first batch.

They scanned the ground carefully, where the feet of the cattle had trodden it down, and one of them rode back to the main body, where he bowed to the leader, a very handsome youth of effeminate appearance, in a rich costume, and said to him in Spanish:

"Senor capitan, the cattle have been driven away, toward the secret hold. I suspect there is something wrong."

Miguel shrugged his shoulders as he answered: "You are a fool, Diaz. The men saw us coming, and knew that we would have a large herd to feed and water, so they took the first lot off. That is all. Get out of the way."

And as the abashed man shrunk back, the troop of horsemen rode on, and went into camp by the further bank of the stream, to give room to the thirsty cattle, as they came rushing and bellowing up.

As for the men, they seemed too tired to do anything but take off their saddles and turn their horses loose.

The ponies went at the grass with the avidity of long fasting, and the cattle, as soon as they had slaked their thirst at the stream—which was not till they had trampled it into mud—followed the example of the horses, with equal eagerness.

In the mean time, the young leader of the men who had just come in threw himself from his pony, and said to the second in command, who was the Englishman, Berkeley:

"Don Giorgio, please to see to the guards, and go up the canyon to look after the first lot of cattle. That Diaz is a fool; but his report is one that may have some truth in it. See that our men are with them."

Berkeley bowed stiffly. There had been a decided coldness between the two, since their little passage of arms at the corral, and the Mexican had put on all the airs of one in authority ever since.

It galled Berkeley, who was sensible of the fact that it was only his own careful maneuvering that had secured the partial success that had been achieved already, and saw, in Bona Vista Miguel, a jealousy that threatened to break into open quarrel at any time.

Being all alone in the midst of the Mexicans, as Miguel had told him, he could not help himself, and had to take what recognition they would accord to him, or run the risk of a knife-thrust from any man disposed to be ugly.

So Berkeley saluted and went after the cattle, feeling very much like a dog that had been beaten and sent off in disgrace.

He did not even take a man with him to help in the search, but went round the corner of the spur, following the tracks of the cattle and entered into the canyon, following the course of the stream, till he came to the valley where the animals had first been taken, to give them all the opportunity to eat that could be given, pending the arrival of the rest.

He saw, from the way the grass was trampled up, that a great crowd had been in there; but no signs of animals or herdsmen were visible.

However he rode on, thinking of little but the way he was being treated by the friends he had helped so much, till the walls of the canyon closed on either side, still without seeing any signs of the cattle he was seeking.

At last, when he was in the narrowest part of the ravine, he heard the bellowing of the animals in front, and quickened his pace, thinking he had found them at last.

On went the canyon, winding to and fro, and he came closer and closer to the sounds.

At last he turned a corner, and saw five or six Indians, with their backs to him, at the entrance of the narrow amphitheater, while the struggling mass of cattle beyond was swaying to and fro uneasily.

Still not expecting harm from his ignorance of the peculiarities of Indian tribes, he went on, imagining that he had come on the Jicarillas,

that he knew to have been left in charge of the cattle.

Whether the Indians saw him or not he had no means of knowing; for they never turned their heads his way, and made no sign of being aware of his presence.

Their whole efforts seemed to be absorbed in keeping the cattle in the narrow place, where they were confined.

Still he rode on, till he had come close to the men on guard, and was about to address one of them, when he was startled by the feet of horses in the canyon, behind him.

Turning his head, he saw, behind him, a party of a dozen or more Indians, coming up the canyon, with their rifles advanced on their saddle-pommels, and the nature of the situation flashed on him at once.

He turned his horse to face them, and was about to draw a pistol, when the Indians threw up their rifles all at once and the leader called out in English:

"No touch gun. Keep still."

The Englishman thought that he had seen the face of this leader before, but was not quite sure.

Of one thing, however, he was absolutely certain: that the Indian, whoever he was, meant to shoot, if the Englishman did not surrender at once, and Berkeley was not so infatuated with his friends that he had not a good deal of regard for his own life remaining.

He remained quiet as the Indians rode up, and the leader advanced to him, threw his own rifle to his saddle, reached over and took from the belt of the Englishman all his weapons, which he threw to the ground as fast as he removed them. Not till Berkeley was completely disarmed did the other speak, and then he pointed to the cattle ahead, and said briefly:

"Git! Git up!"

The words were those of a man who knew but little English, and that slang; but Berkeley understood them perfectly.

He made not the slightest objection, but did as the Indian told him with perfect docility, making his way through the closely packed herd of cattle, which bellowed and jostled round his horse, till he was brought to the end of the narrow amphitheater, where a steep, winding path led up the face of the precipice that bounded it; and here the Indian, who had been conducting Berkeley, said, in the same gruff way as before:

"Git off hoss. Climb."

Berkeley glanced round him and saw that the men who had come with him were close by, while from the top of the rocks all round the amphitheater the heads of a number of men were peeping, some of them in the plumed war-bonnets of Indians, others in the broad hats of the great American cowboy.

He had no time to reflect, for rifles were aimed at him from every quarter; and, judging that he could make nothing by resistance, he dismounted from his pony, and, accompanied by his guide, began to ascend the rocks.

Only one of the Indians followed him, and he arrived at the top of the precipice to find himself in the presence of no less a person than Hank, the Nailer, late Marshal of Satanstown.

Hank was surrounded by the ranchers, whose faces were familiar to the Englishman, and he realized in a moment that he was in deadly peril, for the expression of the faces was that of grave hostility.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN A TRAP.

BERKELEY had no time to think over his predicament, when the Marshal of Satanstown addressed him, with perfect civility:

"This is Captain Berkeley, I believe."

Berkeley drew himself up to reply:

"Well, sir, and what of it?"

Hank smiled, with a peculiar grave air that was not without its effect on the other, as he answered:

"That's this of it, Cap: What air you doin' hyar?"

"I was brought here by these Indians, as a prisoner," replied Berkeley.

Hank nodded.

"That's all right, Cap. But that ain't the question, hyar. It's this. What were you doin' hyar, at all, and what made you come back to Satanta county, when ye'd been warned off, civil-like ons't?"

Berkeley felt a leap at his heart that he could not control, but he managed to say:

"I am not in Satanta county at all; and you know that as well as I do."

"Ay, ay," was the quiet reply; "but ye was in it, yesterday, sir; and ye know it. Ye headed a mob of Greasers and Injuns, to lift all the stock of the caounty, and we faound it, hyar in this place, while we seen a lot more comin'. I ax ye, again, what ye was doin' hyar?"

"And I shall not answer," said Berkeley.

Hank nodded again, and turned to his men.

"Ye see, boys," he said. "It's a clear case, and we've got to do the best we kin fur the evidence. Ye see this man. Haow many is there that knows him fur the man that led the fight at the log-house of the company?"

Top Notch Tom raised his hand.
"I know him by sight, sir, and am ready to swear that it is the same man."

"And I."
"And I."

There were several voices in the replies, and the sheriff nodded his head, as one well satisfied, as he observed:

"Reckin thar ain't much doubt abaout it. Boys, hyar's a gentleman everybody knows. He's b'en warned aout of the caounty ons't, and he's come back at his old tricks or worse. He's stole hosses and cattle, as ye all know, and we've had to come hyar to find 'em. What shall we do with him?"

There was a low murmur at once:

"Hang him! Hang him!"

Berkeley turned pale, but looked defiantly round him, as he said:

"Ay, bang me! That's Texas justice: isn't it? You decoy a man to come here, and then set on him, a hundred to one, and call that justice. I demand a fair trial."

The cowboys and Indians were silent and looked at Hank, the Nailer, who took up the word.

"Cap," he said to Berkeley, "this ain't a case where trial's necessary. You knew you was outlawed in Satanta caounty, and the sentence was passed that, if ye come back, ye was to lose yer life. Ye've come back, and not only that, but ye've been caught in the act; stealin' hosses and cattle; which has b'en death in Texas, sence the State was fu't made out of the wilderness. I'm the sheriff of Satanta caounty, and it's my dooty to see the law executed. I give ye five minutes to say yer prayers, and then ye go over the bank hyar, at the end of a lariat."

He spoke without an atom of passion, and the doomed man could not believe that he was in earnest at first.

"Good heavens, man!" he cried. "It would be murder! cowardly, atrocious murder—"

"Like them you did, when ye come daown on the ranches in the night," said Hank, coldly. "Cap, there ain't no hope fur ye. Tom Field's watch is aout, and we take the time from him—five minutes, and not a second more."

Berkeley stared round him, and when he saw the hard, set faces of the cowboys, staring at him, and noted that they were all stalwart men, with weapons, while he had not so much as a pistol, he turned ghastly pale and faltered:

"But if you spare my life, I can give you information that will be of benefit—"

"Ye'd best give the time to yer prayers," the sheriff interrupted. "One minutes's gone already, and the next is goin'."

"But I can tell you how to get back the rest of the cattle, and clean out the band of Jicarillas that have the passes of the mountains," the Englishman answered.

Hank nodded indifferently.

"Ay, ay, we've h'ard all that, Cap. If you'd have come to us, when the raid was fu't started and told us that, it might ha' done ye some good, but it's too late naow. The most we kin do fur ye is to hang ye decent, and bury ye, so the coyotes won't git yer bones. The third minute is gone, Cap. Ye have but two more to live."

The pallor of the Englishman had become ghastly by this time, as he realized that the marshal meant every word he said.

"Will you spare my life," he asked eagerly. "if I join your band and aid you in the assault on the Jicarillas? I know a place whence you can pick them off, one by one, and never let them enter the mountains. Hear me; I have had a quarrel with the man they call Bona Vista Miguel, and I long to be revenged on him. I can take you to a place where you can have all the advantage you desire, and kill every man below, without danger to your own men. If you will spare my life, I promise to go from the State and never return."

"Ye did that once before, Cap," interrupted the sheriff, gravely; "and ye bruck yer word. We don't want to have ye fight with us; fur we've got the drop on yer friends, anyhaow. The most we kin do fur ye is to let ye see the fight; and arter that ye'll have to hang. We give ye that grace, to show ye a chance to say yer prayers; fur ye haven't begun them yit."

Berkeley caught at the respite.

"You can do anything you like to me, if you will only let me see them caught in their own trap," he ejaculated. "I tell you I hate them, and nothing would rejoice me more than to see them destroyed. Will you give me time, and let me tell you the place I mean?"

Hank turned to the men round him.

"What d'ye say, boys?" he asked.

Punch Burleson spoke out.

"I'm the man that lost the fu't stock, and I say give him a chance, to show if he means right. Thar's all the stock from the Lame Hog Ranch, still aout; but if we git it back, and git the thieves that stole it, we don't want to take no man's life that ain't necessary. I say give him a chance; but I'm only one. What does the cunnel say?"

Thus appealed to, "Colonel" Callahan of the Lame Hog Ranch, answered:

"I'm agreeable, if the rest is. What d'ye say to that, boys?"

There was a low murmur of assent, and the sheriff spoke briskly:

"It's settled, boys. Naow then, Cap, whar's this place, whar you think we kin git on the Greasers and nobody see us?"

Berkeley pointed over the rocks, to a place that he had visited before.

"I know these rocks," he said; "and, right over that ridge yonder, there is a place which overhangs the stream where the cattle are now feeding, whence you can fire on the guards, and run no risk."

Hank the Nailer favored him with a grim smile.

"Aour men air naow thar," he said; "and ef that's all you hev to tell us, we mou't as well string ye up naow, as any time, only we give aour word we wouldn't. Haow come ye up hyar, anyhaow?"

Berkeley gave him a hurried account of the way in which he had been sent up by Miguel, and Hank asked him with much solicitude:

"Cap, hev you b'en much araound that Miguel?"

"I have," was the reply.

"And is he a man, or is she a woman?" asked the sheriff eagerly.

Berkeley looked at him, as if he were surprised.

"Why do you ask?" he said. "I have seen him do things which no woman *could* have done. He has an effeminate appearance; but he is no woman. If ever you come on him in a fight, you will find reason to know that he is a man."

"Did you see him when he was wounded?" asked Tom Notch Tom, who had stood by, listening quietly, all this time.

"Certainly."

"Where was he hit?"

"In the side, with a grazing shot, that knocked him out of the saddle and nearly killed him. But he got over it in an hour or two, and was all right again."

"Was there any doctor round, to dress his wound?" asked Tom, in the same way.

"None, sir. They have no surgeons among them, and, if a man is shot, he has to take his chance of recovery alone."

"Thank you. That is all I wanted to know," said the young rancher coldly; and then the cowboys went off across the top of the rocks, to the very place where they were massing for the expected assault when they were startled by the appearance of the Englishman, in the valley below them.

This place was covered from view from the plain below, by a natural ridge of rock, that enabled the defenders of the elevation to hide themselves and creep on, till they were right over the camp of the unsuspecting robbers, who were too busy at their cooking, below, to keep any sort of a watch on the rocks above, which, moreover, they believed to be occupied by their own friends.

The cowboys and their allies, the Kiowas, under Wild Cat, had made a forced march, the night before, from the neighborhood of the natural corral, starting near dawn, and going all night, by a circuitous route, as hard as their ponies could take them, in relays, till they reached the mountains, some miles to the north, from whence they could see the herd of stolen cattle, under the guard of four or five Jicarillas, who were totally unsuspecting of danger.

The party of rescuers, who mustered, with the Kiowas, nearly a hundred and fifty men, succeeded in gaining the hills unseen by the men on the watch, who were keeping their attention fixed on the Butte, where the signal was expected from their own confederates; and stole round by the valleys, till they came to the very spot where they were now waiting.

From thence to fire in a volley at the unsuspecting guards below was an easy thing; and the result of that volley from picked men was that every man of the guards was killed stone-dead at the first fire.

This result achieved, the rest was easy; for the trampling feet of the cattle soon removed all traces of the blood; and the Kiowas took their places as herdsman, as we have seen, with the best results, in the shape of deceiving the enemy.

Now Hank the Nailer and his friends crept forward to the edge of the ridge, whence they could behold the enemy below, and the sight made them feel that their time was come at last, while it brought to the breast of Berkeley, whom they compelled to accompany them, various unenviable thoughts.

The wary sheriff had had him securely pinioned, and gagged besides, so that he could make no possible outcry; while he compelled him to look over the top of the precipice at the men below.

There they lay, in unconscious security, their arms strewed about on the grass, the ponies and bullocks feeding ravenously, all along the banks of the stream.

Most of the Mexicans were asleep, for they had been in the saddle for many hours, and the Indians were smoking their long pipes, and snuggled on the grass in the manner of men who have nothing to do, while they waited for the

coming of the night, which was to see them resume their journey.

Hank went round among his men, and whispered directions to them as to the Indians they were to aim at; for he desired the first blow to be as effective as possible.

Then he returned to Berkeley and said to him in a quiet, conversational tone:

"Naow, Cap, the fun begins."

As he spoke he leveled his rifle.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MOUNTAIN AND PLAIN.

THE leveling of the sheriff's rifle over the edge of the rocks, was the signal for a line of dark tubes to be directed the same way.

A long, steady aim, and the flash of Hank's repeater was followed, almost immediately, by the yell of a man below, struck through the heart.

Then came a regular roll of shots from the top of the precipice, under which the men below sprung wildly up, stared round them for a moment, as if they knew not whence came the hail of lead, and finally fled in all directions, completely demoralized, running out into the open plain, pursued by the swift bullets.

The Indians, who were awake when the fire began, seemed to be completely bewildered, for they ran to their ponies and tried to catch them, instead of getting into cover.

The Mexicans, who were mostly asleep, awakened in terror and fled over the plain on foot, too frightened to try and get to their horses; but the fire of a hundred and fifty rifles, from a rest, soon made such gaps in their numbers, that they gave up the attempt in despair, and threw themselves down on the grass, as if they had resolved to give up the struggle and die.

Top Notch Tom, who was watching closely, through a gap in the smoke—for he fired but one shot—saw that the only perfectly cool person to be picked out was the dandy Mexican, whom he still suspected of being a woman.

Miguel had been sleeping under the shade of a rock, in plain view, when the attack began, and one of the cowboys had picked him out.

Tom, through his glass, saw that the leg of the dandy's loose-trowsers, on the right side, was red with blood, but the Mexican showed no sign of fear, though he was undoubtedly wounded. He rolled over behind the rock which had shaded him, and the young rancher saw him take his rifle, which lay there, and sight it up at the rocks above him, where the head of a cowboy was visible.

The next moment there was a flash and crack, and the cowboy dropped down where he was crouching, and lay still.

Then Tom, who, from his position, could see the right arm of the dandy Mexican as he lay, took a careful aim, and had the satisfaction of seeing the arm twitched out of sight, while the whole body of the Mexican disappeared from view.

He had squeezed himself behind the stone, and Tom could see him no more. That he was by no means invisible to others, was made evident, soon after, when the Mexican emerged from his imperfect shelter, and hobbled across the open plain, frequently turning to discharge his rifle at the rocks above him, while the Indians, who seemed to be driven to desperation by the incessant fire, stayed where they were, and followed his example.

For a period of about five minutes more the unequal contest was kept up, and then the loss of the men on the plain below became so fearful that they could stand it no longer; but jumped on any ponies they could catch and swept off at full speed toward the ravine, where the cattle had been placed for safety.

The grass below the precipice was reddened with blood and strewn with corpses; but as soon as Hank saw the Jicarillas making for the ravine, he shouted to his men:

"Fight ain't over yet, boys. Run fur the canyon! If the Injuns git to the rocks, they'll git the best of us yit."

The men who were with him, and especially the Kiowas, seemed to feel the force of his suggestions, such was the fame of the Jicarillas, as men of the mountains.

They started and ran, as hard as they could, toward the ravine, and, on arriving there, found that the guards had fled from their charge of the cattle, and taken refuge on the top of the rocks, while the Jicarillas, to the number, still, of nearly fifty, were advancing to storm the rocks, taking advantage of every shelter that could be picked out.

The Kiowas, who had been so brave, the moment before, had already begun to falter; and, had it not been for the cowboys, they would have fled in the very moment of victory, such was the terror inspired by their old foes in the mountains.

Hank, the Nailer, saw their hesitation, and shouted to his men, who manned the rocks and poured a deadly fire into the midst of the men below, driving them back in confusion.

Then came a pause, for the space of about five minutes, during which the wily Jicarillas took cover behind the rocks, and their foes waited above. Then they heard one of the watchers, on a neighboring peak, shout to them:

"The Jicarillas have gone. They are seeking another pass to get to the rear."

Then ensued a panic that positively amazed the sheriff of Satansta county.

The very men who had fought like heroes for him, now that they had an idea that their foes were seeking to gain their rear, came running over the top of the rocks and dashing into the canyon, driving the frightened cattle before them in such a state of confusion that, had their foes been aware of it, they could have returned to the attack at once, and probably driven them in confusion and loss.

Out into the plain below they went, all the cattle and ponies together, in a frightened and huddled mass, threatening another stampede.

Only the fact that the animals were tired and hungry prevented them from rushing off headlong and stampeding for miles. As it was, they only ran a short distance, and then returned to the stream and went on feeding, while the Indians and cowboys got hastily together to meet the attack which they already expected.

It was rather remarkable to see the apprehensive way in which the Kiowas, who had been at the top of the rocks and driven the Jicarillas in such confusion a little before, now looked up at the very rocks which they had vacated, as if expecting that their dreaded foes would make their appearance and drive them off again.

Hank, the Nailer, saw that a very little would set them into a panic, such was the influence of superstition on them, and he called to his cowboys to get the cattle together, and drive them away from the mountain's foot into the plain, out of gunshot from the precipice, whence he had made his own attack, and gathered his forces for a consultation as to the best way to get home again.

Then he counted up his losses and those of the robbers, as testified by the dead bodies, and found that two cowboys had been killed, one of them by the rifle of the dandy Mexican, and three more wounded slightly in the head, the only part of their persons that had been exposed at the top of the rocks, while the dead of the Mexicans and Indians together were counted up, to the number of eighty-seven, showing that the party must have lost half its strength at least.

But they knew from the report of the Kiowas who had been on guard, and who had counted the enemy as they came up, that there had been near a hundred Mexicans, and as many Jicarillas; so that the loss they had sustained, though great, was not enough to reduce them to any great inferiority to the cowboys and Kiowas combined, who only numbered about a hundred and fifty when they started, and who were encumbered by the care of the great herd, now in their hands at last.

But Wild Cat, who was appealed to on the subject of what were the chances, said at once:

"As long as we stay in the plain we can kill all the Jicarillas that come after us; but we must get out of reach of the mountains. My tribe will not fight them there, but here they will not dare to come after us."

And so it proved, when they had got the cattle fairly out of reach of the foot-hills, for they could see the Jicarillas, who had made a circuit by some of the secret passes, known only to themselves, coming out on the top of the very rocks lately occupied by their foes, and trying long shots at the edges of their herds of cattle, compelling the drivers to shift the animals from spot to spot, but never daring to leave the shelter of the rocks to which they were accustomed.

The Kiowas, lately so nervous, threw off all their fears as soon as they found that they were on the plains to which they were used from childhood, and dashed up toward the face of the rocks, while the cowboys drove off the cattle, firing up at the enemy, and covering the retreat with a daring that was a great contrast to their late behavior.

Wild Cat, who was near Top Notch Tom, explained the change to him by saying:

"As long as the Jicarillas are in the rocks, they can beat us two to one; but on the plains we can do the same to them. Our men were afraid that the Jicarillas would get behind them, and shoot them in the backs from the rocks, higher than those we were on; but now they dare not come out on the plain. If they do, you shall see us drive them into their holes."

However this might be, there remained before the cowboys the problem of how to carry off the cattle and ponies they had saved, in the face of an enemy nearly as strong as themselves.

The sheriff of Satansta felt the responsibility of the position, and called a council of the ranchers, who had reclaimed their stock.

The captive Englishman was brought along, bound as he was, and inquiries were made as to the fate of the dandy Mexican, who had disappeared since the rallying of the Jicarillas.

The Kiowas said that he had been seen riding off on a pony, as if he were severely wounded; but no one knew where he had gone, save that it was supposed that he had fled to the Jicarillas.

Punch Burleson said that he had always thought there was as much Indian blood in Miguel as Mexican, and that he was connected

with the chief of the Jicarillas, who went by the name of Agostino, by some ties of blood.

They were discussing the probabilities of the future, and planning how to get the cattle off, while yet it was hardly noon, when they were surprised to see, on the top of the rocks, a white flag, which was held by a tall and very dignified Indian, whose long robe flowed to his feet and trailed behind him.

It was evident that the Jicarillas desired a parley for some reason.

Wild Cat spoke to one of the young Indians, who immediately went forward to the foot of the rocks, and shouted out something to the man at the top, after which quite a conversation ensued, in the form of shouts from one to the other.

Then the young Indian came back and told them what had transpired. It seemed that he had formerly lived among the Jicarillas, long enough to understand their language, and that the old man on the top of the rocks was none other than Agostino himself, the chief of the whole nation of the Jicarillas, who offered to abandon the herds and make no opposition to the departure of the cowboys, on condition that they would give up to him the Englishman, who was held a prisoner among them, that he might help to cure the chief's son, who was dangerously wounded.

When the request was translated to the sheriff of Satansta, he looked doubtfully at Berkeley, as he said:

"I swar, gentlemen, I don't like to let him go; fur if ever a man deserved hanging, that's the man; but what air we to do? If the Jicarillas choose to foller us, all the way to the border, it's ten chances to one but they'll manage to git some of the cattle; while, if we give up this cuss, we shall git them all off, fur I never knew an Injun to break his word, no matter how bad they may be in other things."

So it was finally settled that the Englishman should be given up and set at liberty, while the cowboys continued to drive off the cattle. They unbound him, and set him on the horse he had been riding when he was taken; but, to the surprise of the sheriff, Berkeley, as soon as he had looked at the old Indian at the top of the rock, evinced a great disinclination to go, and said that he knew the Indians wanted to kill him.

"What makes ye think that?" asked Hank. Berkeley looked uneasily at the top of the rock, where the stately figure of the old Indian still stood out against the sky.

"I don't know," he said; "but there is something tells me that he means me harm. I prefer to stay with you, if you will let me."

Hank shook his head gravely. "That's jest what we can't afford to do, Cap. If ye stay with us, ye've got to be strung up!"

Berkeley bit his lips. "Will you give me back my arms, and let me try to make my escape?"

"We'll give ye yer arms, but as soon as ye start we'll have to shoot at ye, Cap."

"Agreed!" was the reply of the Englishman, in a tone of desperation. "Better to die by the hands of brave men, fighting for my life, than to fall into the power of those men up there. I know what they want. They think I have betrayed them."

"And so ye did, Cap, as fur as ye could."

"Give me my arms, then."

They handed him his rifle and pistols, and he took them and looked closely to them. Then he rode off straight toward the rocks, and as soon as he had taken a distance of three hundred yards the sheriff gave the word, and the cowboys opened fire on the fugitive.

Whether it was that the distance was deceptive or the men merciful, it is certain that they did not hit him, though the bullets whistled round him and knocked up the dust, as they could see from where they sat on their horses.

Berkeley put spurs to his horse and rode off round the corner of the spur into the canyon, whence the ascent to the precipice where the Jicarillas were gathered was easy.

The men in the plain below watched the men at the top of the rocks, and saw that the old Indian remained motionless as a statue.

What transpired for the next few minutes no one could tell; but the next thing they saw was Berkeley on the top of the rocks, horse and all. How he had climbed the ascent no one knew, but there he was, in the midst of a number of Indians and Mexicans, who crowded round him.

Those below saw him draw a pistol and fire into the midst of the men who were round him, and then came a rush, when he was torn off his horse by main force, and in a moment more was thrown over the rocks, as if they meant to dash him to pieces under the precipice.

But he only fell about twenty feet, and then stopped with an abrupt jerk, as they saw that the noose of a lariat had been cast round his neck in the short struggle.

The Indians had done what the white men had failed to do. The hasty words which Berkeley had spoken as to the courage of the Mexicans had borne their bitter fruit in the hour of their disappointment, and Berkeley

swung to and fro in mid air, a lifeless corpse, the sport of the elements.

Then the Indians gave a great yell of triumph, and disappeared from the brow of the hill.

The cowboys below hastily drove the herd in their charge further off and began the journey which they knew they had to take.

They sent the animals along at a slow pace; for they knew that any over-driving would end in scattering the herd.

All the afternoon they went slowly along; and, when the sun set, the line of the ridge behind them was blue in the distance.

They went into camp and set guards round the herd; but were not disturbed. It seemed as if the Indians were going to keep their word.

When the morning dawned, the cattle were all there, and the prairie was free from any trace of the enemy; but Wild Cat, who had been out scouting with some of his men, at the first peep of daylight, reported that the party was being followed by some horsemen, and that he feared an attack when they neared the vicinity of the corral.

There was nothing to do, however, but to go on and trust to their sharpness of sense and vigilance, to escape the last peril that was likely to overtake them, before they neared the county line, where they expected that the raid would stop.

The Kiowas hovered on the flank all day, and, as evening approached, reported that the enemy were Mexicans, under the command of Miguel, who rode with his leg bandaged up, but who seemed to be set on capturing some portion of the herd, before night.

They went into camp a second time, though they had made the journey to the mountains from the corral in one day. But the tired state of the cattle prohibited them from any great exertion, and the only consolation they had was that, any attack the enemy could make, could not stampede the animals, which were too exhausted to get up any faster pace than a slow trot, which soon sunk to a walk.

The second night passed quietly, and the dawn was beginning to color the east, when a sudden volley, from the prairie round them, startled the cowboys and Indians to their feet, and showed them that they had not been quite vigilant enough to escape surprise.

There was not a scrap of cover round them, but the flashes of the rifles were incessant, and a fierce attack was in progress.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEATH OF MIGUEL.

THE shots came rattling into the camp, but the cowboys and Indians were too well used, by this time, to surprises, to be taken in a panic.

They were on their native prairie, and the morning was coming.

They started up from sleep without confusion; grasped their arms, and crawled out into the long grass, in a circle, returning the fire of their assailants, till they could recognize figures in the plain, when they saw that their foes had left their horses somewhere out of sight and were firing into the camp, while another party was trying to get near the herd of cattle.

As soon as the light grew strong enough to make the shooting good, the sheriff began to use his rifle; and the repeater of Top Notch Tom cracked again and again, as he caught sight of a broad hat, here and there, in the long grass.

Then the cowboys began to creep outward and extend their line, while the fire of the enemy, which was evidently not from first-class weapons, diminished in force as the light grew better. Finally, without any orders, as with one consent, the cowboys made a rush, and started the foe out of the grass, when they were found to be Mexicans and Indians, in about equal proportion, already demoralized by the fact that they had not succeeded in stampeding their foes.

They fled, as soon as the fire grew fierce, and went over the top of a neighboring swale, the cowboys and Kiowas after them, firing all the time.

As they topped the swell, the cowboys saw the led horses of the assailing party, sheltered by the rolling prairie, and dashed down to drive them away, when a fierce contest ensued, as the Indians of the mountains fought desperately to retain their horses, which threatened to stampede every moment.

Finally they got them off and fled in dismay, when Wild Cat said to Top Notch Tom:

"I said it; did I not? The Jicarilla, on the plain, is no better than the yellow man. He has no heart; for he has left it in the mountains. But we have not done with them yet. The handsome one, they call Bona Vista Miguel, is burning for revenge, and he will have it, if we do not kill him before he can do any more harm. I fired at him twice, this very morning, but did not hit him; for he dodged the ball. We must chase them, or they will end in stampeding the herd."

The advice was seen to be good, when the enemy, after they had got out of gunshot, kept hovering round the edge of the herd, trying to

get up a stampede, and the cowboys, after a short rally, united with the Kiowas to organize a party to keep off the Jicarillas, while the rest drove the cattle onward.

Top Notch Tom and Punch Burleson, with "Colonel" Callahan, were detached on this party by the sheriff, who preferred to stay by the herd he had in charge, that no loss might be laid to him in the event of another stampede.

Most of the Kiowas were with Tom, while the greater part of the cowboys were attending to the cattle, and the rest of the young rancher's party was made up of his friends, the owners of the recovered cattle, and a few cowboys, whom he had selected for their excellence as marksmen and the courage he had seen them display.

As Tom galloped forward the sun rose, and he saw his foes plainly, with the bright figure of the dandy Mexican in front.

For the first time he had an opportunity to see, close by, what sort of man was this mysterious person, whose sex was a matter of doubt; but whose courage and enterprise had already made themselves felt.

Bona Vista Miguel was riding along the front of his men, not five hundred yards off, trying to rally them from the confusion into which they had fallen, when they met the unexpected resistance of the cowboys.

They were mostly Mexicans, but there were, in the lot, quite a respectable sprinkling of Jicarilla Indians, who could be easily distinguished by their war-bonnets.

There seemed to be about seventy of the combined forces, altogether, and they kept up an incessant, but not very well-directed fire at the Kiowas, as the latter rode toward them.

Tom's men amounted to less than fifty, for the herd demanded a great number of guards to keep off the annoyance of the enemy, who were firing at the cattle at intervals, so that the contest was far from being unequal in point of numbers.

Tom got his men into order, and gave the word for a charge; when the Kiowas swept forward over the grassy plain at full speed, with wild yells, and the Mexicans fled at once, with a readiness that argued either extreme demoralization or a plot to draw to an ambush.

Which it would turn out to be remained to be seen, but Tom knew that he had the Kiowas with him, and that they would not readily run into any ambush, so he kept on in his charge.

The Mexicans fled, scattering widely, the dandy Miguel staying the nearest to his pursuers, frequently firing back at the Indians, and never without some result, for he seemed to be a splendid shot.

Tom succeeded in getting within a hundred yards of him, and fired shot after shot, with his best aim, but there seemed to be a charm about the other that saved him from anything but the best aim, taken over a rest, and Tom saw that he kept moving from side to side in his saddle, with a quick, uneven motion, that made a steady aim almost an impossibility.

At last they had chased the Mexicans a mile from the herd, when, out of a swale before them suddenly emerged a body of Indians with loud yells, and charged them back.

The ambush had revealed itself, and the two parties were soon mingled together inextricably.

The cowboys and Kiowas, who kept their coolness, saw that the new body of foes did not number over fifty men, and they charged into them, when the contest became hand-to-hand.

Tom saw the dandy Mexican turn and come back, and he met him squarely.

Both had their pistols out, and fired at each other at close range, shot after shot.

Tom felt the sting of the bullets in several places, and saw the blood spurting from the body of Miguel as he fired, but neither flinched, and both kept on.

The flashes of rifles and pistols; the sharp reports of the weapons; the yells of the excited combatants made a Pandemonium for the space of about ten minutes, which seemed but as many seconds, and then Tom saw Miguel fall; heard a wild wail from his followers, and the whole force of Mexicans and Jicarillas fled in wild confusion, pursued by the victorious cowboys.

Top Notch Tom, who was about to follow the rest, was arrested by a spectacle that made him stop and dismount.

Not ten feet from his horse lay the dandy Mexican, Bona Vista Miguel, the blood welling from his breast, his face pale with the hues of fast-approaching death. He had met his fate at last, and the question would be settled as to who or what he was.

Tom was by no means unhurt himself, for he had received several wounds, of more or less severity, but none of them were disabling; for the bullets from the Mexican's pistol had glanced in most cases, and none had penetrated deep enough to prevent Tom from continuing his work with the cowboys.

He looked over the field, and saw that the Kiowas were pursuing the Jicarillas with a merciless ferocity that showed how eager they were to avenge the feuds of centuries, and he was left comparatively alone, with the dying Mexican.

Miguel lay on his back, staring up at the sky, and Tom went up to him and examined him, with the skill of a surgeon, for he had been bred as such.

He found that the breast of the handsome youth had been penetrated by a pistol-bullet, near the heart, going through the lungs, and that the death of Bona Vista Miguel, was only a question of a few minutes at the most.

He spoke to him, saying:

"Cheer up, amigo. I am a doctor."

Miguel opened his eyes, which were fast becoming glazed with the film of death, and smiled faintly, as he said in Spanish:

"Gracias, señor—pero—no tengo—la vida—"
(Thanks, sir—but—I have—no life—)

Then he stopped, unable to make his meaning more clear, and evidently only half-sensible.

Tom stooped down to ask:

"Do you wish to say anything?"

Miguel faintly shook his head as he answered:

"No—no—nada—nada."

(No, no, nothing, nothing.)

Then his breathing grew shorter and more labored, and Tom saw that he was fast sinking.

He held a flask of spirits to the lips of the dying Mexican, and poured some of the fiery liquor down his throat, when Miguel revived, so that he opened his eyes again, and looked up at Tom with a smile of thankfulness.

But he said feebly in Spanish:

"Demasiado tarde—demasiado tarde—"

(Too late—too late.)

Tom took the head of the dying young Mexican on his knee, and Miguel looked round him as if taking a last look at the scenes to which he had become endeared.

Then he looked up at his protector, and whispered:

"Señor—hay favor—pongáme in—in—tierra sin—sin—"

(Sir—please—put me in—the earth—without—without—)

And with that he fell back dead.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AGOSTINO'S DAUGHTER.

HE had asked to be put into the earth without something; but Tom could not tell what it was, till he had taken a long steady look at the dead face and the outlines of the figure, as it lay on the grass.

Then it flashed on him what the dying Mexican had meant.

Now that no disguise was possible, Tom saw that Miguel, the handsome, was really a woman, and he read her request aright.

She had asked to be buried, without examination that might disclose her sex, and had appealed to him as a surgeon, when there was no one of her own sex to whom the poor creature could make the request.

Tom rose slowly from the ground, and said, as he closed the dead eyes:

"Poor girl, your last wishes shall be respected, and no man shall disturb your ashes."

Who this mysterious girl might have been, and how she came to be the leader of the band of robbers, among whom she was found, the bravest and most desperate, was now no concern of his.

The battle was over, and the enemy were scattered. The Kiowas and cowboys were returning from the pursuit, and the herd was pursuing its way in peace, as Tom looked round.

Far off in the distance, he could see the few remaining fugitives of the combined Jicarillas and Mexicans, making the best of their way to the westward; and knew, from the way they were riding, that they had no intention of returning. The death of their leader had broken their hearts, and they had given up the contest which Miguel's desperate courage had alone kept alive, for so long.

As the cowboys and Indians came back, Tom called them up and asked them to help bury the handsome Mexican, who had met his fate so soon, and about whom there was so much curiosity.

When Punch Burleson saw the body, laid on the grass, he burst out amazedly:

"Gone at last! Is it a man or a woman?"

Tom waved his hand.

"That is not for you to ask or me to answer, now, Punch. It is the body of one who fought bravely, and the last words the dead person spoke to me were a request that the body be laid in the earth, here where the bullet struck it, without any question or examination. If you are gentlemen, you will help me bury it."

There was something in the words he used, and the careful abstention from any mention of sex in speaking of the dead, that prevented the rancher from saying any more, and the rest of the men got off their horses at once, and dug a grave with their knives in a space of time that was shortened by the fact that twenty or thirty men relieved each other in the task, and all worked together.

Within ten minutes a grave, deep and wide enough to hold the body and make it secure from any possible violation by the prowling coyotes of the plain, was excavated, and Top Notch Tom took the body in his arms and placed it there.

As it lay at the bottom of the pit, the cow-

boys and Indians gazed at it with much curiosity, but no one offered to disturb it or to help Tom in his task, with a view of sharing in the discovery of the secret which had tormented their minds for so long.

Only Punch Burleson muttered to himself, as he saw it there:

"It's a darnation pity, if it were a gal, that she didn't let on at fust. She might be hyar, all alive, naow."

But he did nothing toward solving the secret, and when the body had been stared at by all in succession, they began to fill in the grave.

Ten minutes later they left the place, and the long cavalcade wound its way over the prairie, leaving a mound of fresh earth to mark the resting-place of Bona Vista Miguel, man or maid as it might be, but brave as the bravest man that ever rode in a foray in any event.

They overtook the party of the sheriff in charge of the herd, and pursued their way over the plain in the direction of the corral, where they intended to rest the stock before they undertook the return journey.

Tom rode up to Hank, told the sheriff what had occurred, and whispered something in his ear which made Hank nod his head gravely, and remark, in a tone that no one but Tom heard:

"I thought so, all the time."

Then they pursued their way and made the corral of the Maverick-hunter late in the afternoon, where they were surprised by one of the Kiowas, who had been lingering on the trail, and who came in to report that a small party of the Jicarillas was coming toward the camp, headed by the old chief who had promised that there should be no more hostilities, when he claimed the Englishman as a prisoner.

The cattle were hastily driven into the corral, and the sheriff, with a party of his best men, rode back to meet the Indians, anticipating an attack.

As soon as he had cleared the vicinity of the camp, he saw the Indians, to the number of about twenty, coming over the plain in a body, but they bore a white flag in advance, and, through the glass, one might see they had no weapons, and came presumably on a peaceful errand.

Scanning the horizon as far as they could, with the Kiowas out scouting all round them, no trace of the enemies was to be found for miles, and even the wary sheriff and Wild Cat were convinced that there was no trick in the coming of the Jicarillas. They wanted to talk and that was all.

As the sheriff rode up, the Jicarillas halted, and the old Indian, who had spoken to them from the top of the rocks, came forward, alone, with the white flag.

Hank the Nailer seeing that he wanted a parley, rode to meet him and grasped the extended hand of the other, saying:

"How!"

The Jicarilla chief bowed with a grave dignity that became him well, and said, in Spanish:

"Does your worship understand our tongue?"

Hank hesitated, for he was not a good linguist, and he answered in the best Spanish he could muster:

"No, but we have men with us who do. If you will let them come forward, we can talk."

The Jicarilla bowed again.

"Let it be so," was all he said.

Then he swung himself slowly off his horse, and sat down on the earth, when he drew, from a pouch at his side, the long pipe that is the prelude to every Indian conference, and gravely filled it with tobacco, before saying another word on the business on hand.

Hank beckoned Tom Field up, and the young rancher approached with Punch Burleson and took his seat by the old Indian.

At a sign from Hank, the rest of the party drew back, and the Kiowas remained out on scouting duty, to prevent a surprise, while the old chief opened his business.

"My name is Agostino, and I am the chief of the Jicarilla nation," he began, with a pride that showed he expected the statement to make a great impression on his hearers. "My people are the kings of the mountain, and no man has ever passed our way without paying tribute."

Pausing to let this statement gain its full weight, he continued:

"The Jicarillas are a great people, but their home is on the rock, and they are not the children of the plain. My brothers, there has been a great crime committed against us, and the word of the Jicarilla, that was never broken before, has been made of no more weight than a white man's lie. You gave up to us the man who had betrayed us, and we promised to let you take your cattle back. Nevertheless, the men of the south, whose faces are yellow, rose and said, after you had gone, that they had no part in my word; and they persuaded some foolish young men of my tribe to follow after them. I warned them that they would come to harm, but they would not listen to me, and therefore are they all dismayed now."

He paused and seemed to expect an answer, but no one spoke, and he resumed:

"The young men who are killed fell into a trap, and deserved to die; but there was one

among them who was no warrior, though wearing the garb of a man. I come to ask you, have you Bona Vista Miguel a prisoner, or not?"

Tom immediately answered.

"We have not. He was killed in the battle; was buried where he fell, by our hands; and we raised a mound over his grave."

The old chief inclined his head, and there was an expression of profound sorrow on his face, as he said:

"That was the act of a brave white warrior. Was the body scalped?"

"It was not touched, save by myself. I put it into the grave, and I saw Miguel die. He asked me to bury him without touching him, or disturbing the body."

Agostino again inclined his head.

"It is well. Did the white chief try to find out anything after the death?"

"I tried nothing."

"It is well again. I will tell the white men what they have not asked. Bona Vista Miguel was a woman, and my daughter. Her mother was a woman of the south, and the child, if it had been a boy, would have been the chief of the Jicarillas, after my death. As it was, she was braver than any son could have been, and she led the tribe in every foray, since I have been too old to ride, as I used to do. I came to ask the fate of my daughter, and to thank the white man who had buried her, without touching her or disclosing her secret to the rest."

He held out his hand to Tom as he spoke, and grasped that of the young rancher, with a fervor about which there was no mistake.

Then he said:

"There are some of the yellow men who are left. If the white stranger who buried my daughter wishes, I will send them to his camp as prisoners. They have cost my tribe a number of warriors, and they are no use to us. If you desire it, my young men shall deliver them to you, bound hand and foot."

The offer was such a surprise to the sheriff, when it was fully interpreted to him by Tom, that he hastily ejaculated:

"What do we want of them?"

"You may want a few to make examples of," Tom suggested, and Hank saw the point and said:

"Tell him that we don't want them *all*; but if he will send us about a dozen of the ring-leaders, we shall take it as a pledge of his good faith. That is all."

Tom translated the answer and Agostino said: "It shall be done at once; and from henceforth there is peace between us, if the white men will give us a tenth of the cattle."

Then he rose, and added, as he was going to his horse:

"If you will promise us the tenth of the cattle you shall have the men."

Hank could hardly help laughing aloud, at the craft with which the old chief had kept the real object of his visit to the last; but he promised to consult his friends, and went off for that purpose.

The ranchers made some resistance; but when they found that the condition of giving up the cattle was the delivery of the robbers for justice, the opposition faded out, and they knew that the county would pay them for all the stock that they found necessary, to buy the example that would be made of the prisoners. The bargain was struck, and the old chief rode away, to return an hour later, with twelve men, bound hand and foot; all Mexicans; all frightened out of their lives at the prospect of immediate hanging; but all powerless to resist.

Then the stipulated cattle were driven out, and the Jicarilla chief rode off, quite satisfied that he had maintained his point, and that the custom of the Jicarillas had not been broken, for they had taken their toll as the price of safety from further annoyance.

The next day the herds were started on the return to Satanstown.

CHAPTER XXX.

DEAF SMITH'S COURTSHIP.

THREE months had passed away since the great raid on the stock of Santa county, that swept half the cattle and ponies in one night.

The log-house of the cattle-company, that had stood the first assault of the robbers, was as firm as ever, and there was a great bustle in the neighborhood, as the ranchers of the county came riding from all quarters to the house, to attend a general gathering that was to take place at Satanstown, that day, when the robbers, that had been captured in the act of cattle-thieving, were to be tried for their lives by a jury of intelligent citizens of the neighborhood.

Hank, the Nailer, sheriff of the county, looking better than ever in his new suit of velvet, cut in the Mexican style, was in the advance of the cavalcade that set forth from the house, and he was followed by all the ranchers of the county, and a number of ladies on horseback, who wanted to see the opening of the court; for

Judge Levy was to take his first criminal case that day, and his old opponent, Jose Concha, was to defend the prisoners.

Hank and Top Notch Tom were accompanied by their wives, and it was noticed that the ranchers in the rear had got into couples, each with a lady for the other member of the pair, and were riding carelessly, as if they did not take much heed where their horses went, as long as the riders had a chance to continue the conversation, without being overheard by envious comrades.

There was "Colonel" Callahan, of the Lame Hog Ranch, riding with Miss Mattie Howe; Punch Burleson, trying to keep his accent and slang in the back-ground as far as he could, to please Miss Vivian Gay, who came from the far East, in the State of Massachusetts; Limpy Balstrap, riding with Tom Field's sister, Lucy; and even Deaf Smith, whom no one had ever known to talk to a lady before, such was his sensitiveness to his infirmity and his consequent bashfulness, making another couple with Miss Lottie Clark, who had found the way to talk to him, with her lips and eyes together, so that he could understand every word she said, and do more in the way of answering it than he had ever been known to do before.

Scraps of their conversation on the way were overheard and recorded by various envious ranchers, who had small places and did not yet aspire to be known among the aristocracy of the county, and they were caught up and retailed, that evening, round the bar of the Lone Star House, when the listeners were sufficiently under the influence of "the ardent" to talk out and speculate on the probability of the matches, expected to come off in a short time.

Deaf Smith and his fair friend had ridden to such a distance from the crowd, as they approached the town, that Miss Lottie became alarmed, and said to her companion:

"Why, Mr. Smith, they have left us all alone. Sha'n't we hurry up and catch the rest?"

Deaf Smith had got into the habit of eying his companion very closely as she spoke, in order to catch the words as they fell from her lips, by the motion; but, that day, he was deafener than usual, and misunderstood her to a wonderful extent.

"What is that you say, Miss Lottie?" he asked. "The rest of them, did you say? Oh, they know where they're going, and don't want any guide, I reckon. Naow about that raound-up we was speaking of. You never saw one; did you?"

"No, not yet," she replied. "But I was asking, Mr. Smith, if we ought not to ride a little faster?"

"Ride faster? Oh, I see what you mean, Miss Lottie. Ye want to know if the men ride faster than they do generally, when thar's a raound-up. Waal, I'll tell ye abaout that. Ye see, it all depends on the cattle, and haow thar handled. I keep abaout twenty thaousand head myself, and my boys never drive 'em so hard that they has to run, ef it kin be helped—"

"But you don't understand me," cried the young lady, speaking as plain as she could, and adding her words with gestures. "I mean that the rest have ridden on, and we are alone."

Deaf Smith looked around, and saw that she had told the truth, for they were alone on the green plain, about half a mile behind the rest of the cavalcade, which was nearing the town by this time.

Then the face of the deaf rancher became wreathed in a smile, as he said:

"Why so they *are*, gone, and I never saw it. It's all your fault, Miss Lottie."

"All my fault!" echoed the young lady.

"Yes, all your fault, Miss Lottie," the rancher said deliberately. "Ye see, I was too busy, trying to make aout what you was saying, and didn't notice what was going on. But naow that we *air* alone, I want to ask ye suthin' that's b'en on my mind, ever so long."

Miss Lottie colored deeply. She would not have been a woman if she had not, and Deaf Smith, in spite of his infirmity, was a fine-looking fellow and a rich rancher.

So, with a demure air and the lowest of voices, she asked him:

"What is it, Mr. Smith?"

And Deaf Smith heard and understood her, too, though a hearing man would not have caught the words. But then he was watching her lips.

"Waal," he said, "I was going to ask ye, Miss Lottie, haow d'ye like—Texas?"

He had meant to say something else, but his courage failed him at the decisive moment, and he changed the form of the question.

Miss Lottie smiled.

"I like Texas very well, sir, if that is what you want to know, as far as the men I meet are concerned. I should be very ungrateful, indeed, if I forgot all that you gentlemen did for us ladies when those horrid robbers stole us away. If it had not been for you, what might not have happened? I shudder to think of it."

Deaf Smith smiled, as if the compliment pleased him, and answered:

"That was nothen, Miss Lottie. Any man would have done the same fur ye. But that

ain't what I meant. I want to know if you think you'd dare to *live in Texas*, if you was to settle daown hyar? Wouldn't ye be frightened?"

"No; not now," said the young lady. "I will own that, while you were all away, I was frightened to death; but they tell me that there is no possible chance of that terrible thing being done again, and that we are as safe in this county as if we were in the North."

"That's a fact," said Smith, delighted. "Ye needn't have no fears naow, Miss Lottie, fur we've organized a company of rangers, and they'll keep the caounty cl'ar of robbers fur a while yet. But s'pose a man was to ask ye to marry him and stay hyar in Texas all the rest of your life; d'ye think ye'd dar' to do it?"

Miss Lottie colored again deeper than before. "I could not answer that question," she said, "till the right man came along to ask it. It is not *any man's* place to ask me such a question, and if you please, sir, the sooner we ride on the better I shall like it."

Deaf Smith looked frightened in his turn, as he ejaculated:

"Miss Lottie, Miss Lottie, ye ain't angry, air ye, with me? Naow, don't say ye *air*, fur I didn't mean nothen disrespectful. I'd die fur ye afore any man should do it."

She had whipped up her pony, and he was riding beside her, trying to see her face, which she kept averted.

Presently, as he spoke so earnestly, she turned to him, and said with a smile:

"No, I'm not angry; but you frighten me, the way you talk, sir."

Deaf Smith broke out at once:

"Frighten ye, Miss Lottie! That were the last thing in my thoughts. Won't ye ride a little slower, fur a minit. I want to say suthin' to ye. Indeed I do, and I *must* say it afore we git to taown; fur I won't have another chance."

The girl slackened her pace at once, and asked:

"Well, sir, what is it?"

Deaf Smith was excited, or he would not have dared to say what he did now, but the desperation he felt at the thought of the lady escaping him, made him bold, and he broke out:

"I want to say to ye, that I've got a ranch that can't be beat in Santa county, and two hundred thaousand dollars in bank; but thar's one thing that I hain't got yit, and I won't be happy till I do. Thar's Hank Kimble and Tom Field has their wives, and I hain't got no one to take keer of me, Miss Lottie, and, if ye'll only marry me, I'll be the happiest man in Texas, and I'll make you the happiest woman too, fur there ain't nothen ye want that I won't give ye. Thar; it's aout at last, and I didn't think I'd find the grit to say it. Will ye marry me?"

Lottie Clark could hardly help laughing at the rough devotion of her adorer, but there was also something in the homely, earnest way he spoke, and the knowledge she had of his character, that chased the laugh from her face, as she answered with feeling:

"Mr. Smith, I will not pretend to deny that you have paid me a great compliment; but are you sure that you would be happy with me for a wife? Remember that I was not brought up here, and that I might prove a drag to you in many things. Be sure that you mean what you say."

It was astonishing how well the man, who was usually deaf as a post, understood every word she said. Truly there is no interpreter like love, and the rough rancher was over head and ears in love with the Yankee girl.

"I know all ye'd say," Miss Lottie, he answered earnestly; "and there isn't a word that I hain't said to myself, more than twenty times. I've said that ye'd find me rough, and that ye'd miss the fine ways and soft talk ye're used to, up north; but, if ye don't mind that, I won't, and if it's a true heart and a strong hand that ye need to take keer of ye, I've got it, at yer sarvice, every time. Don't say no, Miss Lottie. Take a little time to think over it, afore ye say it right aout. I want a wife, and if you'll have me, I'll take ye to Yurrap, if ye want to go. If ye don't like the rough ways, hyar, I'll sell aout. I kin do it any time, and draw a good five hundred thaousand dollars from the stock; but I *did* think that ye might find aour ways pleasant, if ye was once to see the haouse, I'll build, as soon as ever ye say ye'll marry me."

He had said all he could, and watched her with a timid longing that was very pleasant to the young lady, who saw plainly how she was adored.

She made him no answer, however, for some minutes, during which she rode on toward the town.

At last, as they were nearing the outskirts, she turned to Smith.

He watched her lips eagerly, to catch what she said; and this was what he saw her frame:

"Mr. Smith, I don't want to answer at once; but I'll think over it. I want to ask Mrs. Field. She is a great friend of mine, and I shall rely on her advice."

Deaf Smith smiled with delight.

"Mrs. Field!" he exclaimed, "Will ye go by what she says, *reely*? Then I tell ye what it is, Miss Lottie; I might as well go and git the

ring, for you'll never find Di Field go back on her own State. It's settled."

And he whipped up his pony and said no more on the subject, as they rode into town, till they saw Diana Field, in advance; when, to the utter dismay of Lottie, the deaf rancher rode up to the lady, and said to her, in a tone that he had no idea was so loud; before everybody:

"Mrs. Field, I want a word with ye, please."

Diana turned to him, smiling; for she had always like the deaf rancher.

"Well; here I am; what is it?" she asked.

Deaf Smith pursued tranquilly:

"I've jest b'en askin' Miss Lottie Clark, hyar, to marry me, and she says she'll go by what you say. Will ye please tell her what sort of a husband you think I'd make?"

And Lottie, crimson with confusion, could not find breath to deny, before all present, the audacious story of the rancher and could hardly reply, when Diana said, laughing:

"Well, Mr. Smith, this is a strange story you have to tell. What sort of a husband would you make? How can I tell, till you're tried? But this I will say, that, if honesty and good sense will make a good husband, the woman who gets you will never have cause to regret it."

There was something in the way she spoke out, before all the ranchers, in the same frank spirit in which Smith had asked the question, that struck a sympathetic chord in the hearts of the Texans present, and Hank, the Nailer, exclaimed at once:

"Three cheers for Deaf Smith! Boys, there's going to be a wedding hyar, soon."

But Lottie, who was used to Northern ways, was so overcome at the publicity with which the whole affair had been conducted, that she turned her pony and rode away, while Deaf Smith never stopped till he caught up with her in the plain, when he had hard work to make peace with her, so much was she shocked at the way they do these things in Texas.

What arguments he used, or what he said to pacify her, none could ever rightly tell; but certain it is that, an hour later, he and the young lady rode up into the town together, when the cowboys had disappeared from the street, and long rows of tethered ponies, in front of the court-house, told where the owners had gone, when Lottie Clark took his arm to ascend the steps of the court-house, with that peculiar air of an "engaged" person, that there is no mistaking.

Deaf Smith, with all his disadvantages, was the first of the ranchers to win a wife.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

MEANWHILE, in the court-house, the trial of the Mexican robbers was going on, and Jose Concha was doing his best for his clients. He had no fee to hope for, for the poor creatures had no money, and still less friends; but Jose was a Mexican by blood, and did the best he could for his unfortunate compatriots.

But the facts were against them, and a Texas jury sitting on horse and cattle-thieves, is not apt to let itself be diverted from stern justice by any appeals for mercy.

Jose did what he could by trying to lay the blame of the whole matter on the Jicarillas and the man who had led them on, but it was no use.

The Mexicans were convicted of cattle-thieving, and Judge Levy delivered the sentence, which astonished the Texans by its lenity.

They had expected hanging, instead of which the judge, who had a little more acquaintance with the law than the rest of the men of Satanstown, sent the culprits to the penitentiary for twenty years, and ordered the sheriff to take them away.

And then, outside the court-house arose murmurs loud and deep, and the cowboys, who had expected a hanging to exercise their taste for excitement, began to talk of taking the prisoners from the guard, and lynching them at once.

Levy was frightened at first and thought that they would execute the threat; but when he had given his order to the sheriff, Hank, the Nailer, only nodded his head and said:

"If that's the law, yer honor, they shall be taken to the penitentiary, and if any man or men gits in between me and my duty, so much the worse fur him."

He took the prisoners, who were overjoyed at the escape they had had from hanging, and not disposed at the moment to think much of the imprisonment, in the reaction from fear of death, and put them in pairs, while he mustered a posse of men, who could be depended on to guard them against any attempt at rescue.

In the posse were Tom Field, Punch Burleson, Colonel Callahan and Limpy Balstop, whom he had selected as the best shots, and the men most respected in the community, to execute the difficult duty before them.

He had intended to add Deaf Smith to the list, but as soon as he heard the rumor that had gone the rounds that Deaf Smith was going to marry the Yankee lady, he said:

"Then we don't want him to-day; fur a man

in love ain't to be depended on, arter the gal's said 'yes,' till he's b'en married a year at least. When he orter be thinkin' of his duty, he's thinkin' of his gal. Let him go, boys."

Therefore, when the prisoners, twelve in number, came forth from the court-house, ironed in pairs, there was only a guard of five men, including the sheriff, of whom three walked ahead of the little procession, two brought up the rear, while the prisoners kept buddled close together, as if they were afraid that, if they got out of the line, they would be shot.

That their fears were not by any means groundless was apparent, as soon as the procession made its appearance at the door of the court-house.

The streets were full of people, and old Judge Collingsworth, with a bevy of ladies in his train, mounted their horses, just as the sheriff made his appearance.

Hank had concerted this little scheme; for he knew the respect in which Texans hold ladies, and thought that the excited cowboys would not be so apt to break out, if they saw them in their vicinity.

But he had not reckoned on the feeling of the cowboys, and especially on that of the citizens of the town, who were rampant for a hanging and too much excited to notice the presence of the ladies.

No sooner did the prisoners make their appearance on the steps than a general howl of anger rose from the crowd, and the cry was raised:

"Lynch them! Lynch them!"

The ladies in Judge Collingsworth's company turned pale as they heard the yell, for it came from furious men, accompanied with a storm of curses, that showed how the men had lost all control of themselves.

Lottie Clark trembled on her pony and caught hold of Deaf Smith's arm, while the other young ladies were staring at the little group of men with rifles, in charge of the prisoners, as if they expected to see them torn to pieces.

The sheriff turned to his little posse and made a silent signal with his hand, when all five brought their rifles to the front, and faced the angry mob ready to fire.

The action produced a momentary pause, and a stillness that would only have lasted a few seconds, had it not been for the coolness of Punch Burleson, who called out, as soon as he saw that silence was secured:

"Sheriff! sheriff! Speech! speech!"

He had caught the popular taste for speeches, nowhere stronger than in Texas, and the silence was broken by a voice in the crowd:

"Ay, ay! give us a speech! Hank the Nailer!"

Then the stalwart sheriff stepped to the front and held up his hand as a signal for silence, as he began, in the old familiar formula:

"Fellow-citizens!"

The ladies looked at each other in astonishment, for the crowd, lately so turbulent, had hushed itself at once, and the eyes of all were turned on Hank the Nailer, as if to find what he had to say.

And Hank said it at once in the following words, brief and to the point:

"Fellow-citizens, you elected me sheriff, not four months ago, and I have got to do the duty you set me to do. Here are twelve men who have got to be punished, and I am taking them to the penitentiary. I don't want to say anything more than this: if any man in this crowd interferes to rescue these men, my posse will fire on him, and when they fire they shoot to kill. Clear the way there!"

As he spoke he made a wave of his hand, and pointed his rifle at a man in front of him.

Again to the surprise of the ladies, the man immediately backed his horse, crying:

"Don't shoot! don't shoot, Hank! I'm one of your friends! Git out of the way, boys; give the sheriff room."

Hank did not offer to stir till he saw the movement spreading, when he cried aloud:

"If this street isn't cleared in five minutes, my men open fire. I don't want any horse-thieves to rescue these prisoners. They've got to be punished, and I intend they shall be. Git! all of you! Git!"

As he spoke the silence became positively oppressive, and the clicking of gun-locks in the hands of his men became distinctly audible.

That sound, breaking in on the stillness, had a wonderful effect on the crowd.

The very men who had been howling for the blood of the prisoners, as soon as they saw that the sheriff meant business, and that their own blood would be the first to flow, turned their ponies and rode off, so that the street emptied in a space of time shorter than Hank had assigned as the limit.

Then a large van drove up to the steps, and the prisoners were put into it.

It was large enough to accommodate all the prisoners inside, and the top would hold a dozen men.

The driver was armed with a rifle and a pair of revolvers, and looked as if he knew how to use them.

The sheriff put his prisoners inside, and got

up on the roof, while his posse took possession of the places round the van meant for guards.

Judge Collingsworth heaved a sigh of relief, and said to his daughter Helen:

"Come, my dear, the danger is past."

For they could see, out at the end of the street, that the cowboys were riding off into the country, and the townsmen were dispersing to their homes.

Hank waved his hand to the ladies:

"No more trouble, ladies," he cried. "If ye want to see us off in the train, ye kin come along, and no one will say a word to ye."

Then the van drove off down the street, and the cavalcade of ladies followed it, with a sprinkling of men, who could be relied on to protect the sheriff, rather than hinder him in the execution of his duty.

As the cavalcade went on, the crowd gathered at every step, till they reached the railroad station, which was at the other end of the town.

Satanstown was on a branch of one of the Western Texas railroads, though there were but few trains run, and those chiefly for freight.

A special car, with a single engine, had been engaged to take the prisoners, and it was waiting to carry them off, as the van drove up, the steam escaping from the funnel of the locomotive.

The van was greeted with another yell, and a number of the townsmen, who seemed set on having a hanging for their own special benefit, came round the station, with their pistols out, shouting the old cry.

Once more the ladies felt decidedly nervous, but again the coolness of the sheriff and his posse was equal to the occasion.

He had sent a number of his regular men to the station, in advance, and these now made their appearance at the door, and charged out on the rioters, pistol in hand, and boldly went into the midst of them, arresting them for the offense of "carrying weapons in the town."

The charge was effectual, for the laws were as strict as ever in Satanstown, as to the carrying of pistols, and the rioters submitted to being disarmed, as meekly as lambs. The change in their demeanor was so sudden as to be ludicrous, and even the most nervous of the ladies could not help laughing as they were sent off to the lock-up, to be fined when the court opened the next morning.

The sheriff was allowed to transfer his prisoners to the special car prepared for them, and in five minutes more the train rolled out of the shabby little station, and swept off over the prairie to the southwest, when Judge Collingsworth heaved a sigh of relief, and said:

"Well, well, that was well done; wasn't it?"

And then out of the station came Punch Burleson, Colonel Callahan and Limpy Balstop, looking a little red in the face, and mounted their ponies to join the ladies, as they took the way to the ranches.

Tom Field and the sheriff had gone off in the train with the ordinary officers, and Punch told Judge Collingsworth that it was the intention of both to return, as soon as they had seen the train safe to the borders of the county, and out of the reach of any malcontents that might try to throw the car off the track.

As the party rode home, Helen Kimble and Diana Field rode with their father, but the other ladies were paired off, just as they had been in the morning, and it was remarked by the judge, as he drew near the company's ranch, that the couples had dropped out, all along the way home, so that the nearest was a mile behind.

The judge cast a quizzical look at his eldest daughter, as he said:

"Hillo, Nelly, what's the matter with the girls? I thought that we had agreed to meet at dinner at the company log-house."

"So we had," she answered; "but there is a little business to arrange on the way, and that takes time, you know, sir."

"What business do you mean?" asked the judge, who, since the marriage of his daughters, had become very simple and non-observant of the love-affairs of his neighbors.

Diana burst out laughing.

"Oh, you dear, simple old father," she exclaimed; "don't you see what is going on? There is Mr. Smith engaged, and don't you see that Burleson is dead gone on Mattie—no I mean on Vivian, while the colonel is no less set on Mattie Howe. I feel sure that, when they come in, you'll find that every one of those girls will have a confidence to make to one of us, for the one man is sure to set the other on. Even poor Mr. Balstop cannot escape the infection. It is astonishing how much sheep and men are alike. If one goes, the others must needs follow, and because Smith has got a wife, all the rest will be wanting the same. Look, there comes the first couple."

As she spoke, they were by the steps of the great log-house that had seen so many festivities and exciting times; for they had agreed to dine there, and wait for the return of Hank and Top Notch Tom.

Diana pointed to the leading couple of those that had lingered behind, and the two people were galloping up toward the house as hard as

they could, as if they had but just discovered they were late, and were trying to make up for lost time.

As the riders drew nearer, Helen said, with a smile:

"I would have sworn Punch Burleson would get ahead of the rest. He's so energetic."

It was Punch and Vivian Gay, the girl with her pretty face wreathed in smiles and red with blushes, that told the tale before they came.

Then Punch took off his hat, and waved it in the air, crying:

"Judge, wish me joy! Ladies, I'm the happiest man in Texas, I reckon."

"Why, what has happened, Mr. Burleson?" asked Diana demurely.

Punch gave a yell that would have wakened a sound sleeper, and that startled the cattle on the ranch for near a mile.

"Happened!" he cried. "I'm goin' to be married, Mrs. Field, and don't ye furgit it, and I've got the nicest wife in all Texas. Present company always excepted."

Punch added this as an afterthought, but that he did not really believe it was plain from the proud glance he cast at his little *fiancee*, who, on her part, said nothing, but hung her head and looked sheepish, till Diana comforted her by saying:

"I agree with you perfectly, Mr. Burleson, and I can tell Vivian that she has got the best husband in Texas too, though I used to think that I had the man myself. But we are getting to be old folks now, and you have the honeymoon yet to go through."

Then they looked round. Two more couples were seen galloping up, and Colonel Callahan came in first, swinging his hat and shouting:

"Be the powers, I've done it at last, Mrs. Kimble, as ye advised me, and she says 'Yes'. I'm the happiest man in Texas, and I've got the best wife in the States."

"Ye hain't got nothen' of the kind, ye old blower!" chimed in the voice of Limpy Balstrop, who brought up the rear with Lucy Field. "Isn't my girl the sister of Top Notch Tom, and ain't she ready to stand up alongside of any gal in Texas? I tell ye I'm the happiest man in Texas and I've got the best wife of the whole ranch. Naow, what d'ye say?"

And, from the excitable way he glared at the colonel, it was evident that Limpy was disposed to quarrel with any man who would not allow his bride to be the prettiest in the world, after the fashion of the knights of old, who were always ready to break a lance for the lady of their affections.

But Mrs. Kimble was there, to pour oil on the troubled waters, and prevent the drawing of revolvers; and she made them all happy by saying, in her best way:

"It's all right, and if there is a man here who is not convinced that he is the happiest man in Texas, he ought to be ashamed of himself. The fact is that you're all happy, and ought to be, and we two poor women, who have lost our husbands for a time, are the only unhappy ones in the party. Come, get off your ponies, girls—or rather let the gentlemen help you off. We are going to have dinner in ten minutes, and drink the health of all the brides."

The proposition suited all parties, and was so soothing to the feelings of Limpy, that he said to Callahan, as they went up the steps:

"See hyar, cunnel, I didn't mean nothen' ag'in' your gal. I'll allow she's a leetle the handsomest, but then mine's the best, and she's got the temper of an angel."

The colonel smiled good-naturedly, and a little of the humor of his native race shone out in his eye, as he said:

"Bedad, Limpy, and if ye go on that way, three months after ye've got her, I'll say ye're the best husband in Texas. Sure and I know Mattie has a timper of her own, or she wouldn't have thim black eyes of hers."

So peace reigned over the land, and the dinner passed off quietly.

The health of the brides was duly drank, and there was an animated dispute as to the priority of the engagements, which was cut short by Deaf Smith proposing that, as he was undoubtedly the first in the field, and the rest scattering, they should drink the health of Lottie first, and all the rest in a bunch.

When it came to making the responses to the toasts, however, there was no dispute as to who should be the first, for every one was ready to give up to the rest, all the bridegrooms being of the order of men who are unable to think when they are on their feet.

Deaf Smith, who could not hear what his neighbors said, turned out to be the best speaker of the number, and made the only response that was at all worthy of the occasion, for he did not say that he was "unaccustomed to public speaking," and made his thanks for the honor that had been done to him and his future wife, while he took occasion to praise the other ladies, and say how happy he was that his friends had followed his example.

Punch tried to speak and broke down, and Limpy did not even get up, but asked to be excused, while Colonel Callahan merely remarked, when he was called on, that:

"He had enough to do to mind his eye when

Mrs. Callahan was looking at him with those eyes of hers to say anything more than thank ye all."

But the speeches were broken in on by the distant scream of the steam-whistle, and half an hour afterward Hank and Top Notch Tom rode up to the log-house, dusty with their long ride, with the intelligence that they had left the prisoners all right, and that no one had tried to intercept them after they had left the station.

And then came more dinner for the two travelers, and more speeches after the repast, in which the married men acquitted themselves so much better than the bachelors that their wives looked on them with pride, and the young ladies about to become brides told their special company, after they were all out on the piazza, spooning in corners, that "they were ashamed of them for not doing better."

But when a man is talking to an audience of one, and that one a woman who has told him that she is willing to share his life for weal or woe, he is apt to become eloquent, however quiet he may be at other times, and the end of the matter was that peace was made. When Punch and his friends went home that night, they had forgotten everything in the world except that they were the "happiest fellows in Texas," and had got on all day without anything in the shape of whisky without beeding it.

Two months after that day there was a quadruple wedding in the great log-house of the cattle company, and the brides were all from the North, while the bridegrooms were of the unmistakable Texan rancher stamp.

The men were our old friends, Limpy Balstrop, Colonel Callahan, Deaf Smith, and Punch Burleson, and the brides were Lucy Field, Mattie Howe, Vivian Gay, and Lottie Clark.

The ladies had all seen Texan life, had been captured by bandits, had had hundred-mile rides, and seen fights, just the same as men, and yet they had deliberately chosen their lot in Texas, and were going to live there all the rest of their lives.

The wedding was attended by all the ranchers in the neighborhood, and an unlimited amount of cowboys were on the grass outside the house, where they spent the time in having a general spree, in which there was not a shot fired, and everybody behaved like a gentleman.

At the close of the ceremony, the happy couples rode to Satanstown, whither their baggage had preceded them, and took their departure for a tour all over the Northern States; for there is nothing a cattle-king will not do in the way of spending money, when he is in love; and the four ranchers were all dead in love with the girls who had given them their hands that day.

If the reader of these sketches ever happens to visit Santa County, Texas, he will find its condition changed materially for the better, since the marriages that introduced comfort and refinement in the place where things used to be so rough.

Hank, the Nailer, has given up the office of sheriff, after two terms, and his friend Top Notch Tom has retired from the assembly; while Punch Burleson has turned into the meekest of men, under the control of his little Yankee wife, who rules him entirely and makes him as happy as the day is long.

Deaf Smith is more sensitive to the fact of his infirmity as the years roll by, and insists that he "can hear as well as anybody if you will only speak plain." He can understand his wife, and people say that she understands him as no one else does.

Colonel Callahan is now the richest man in his part of Texas, and his ranch has changed its name from that of the "Lame Hog" to the more euphonious and equally truthful title of the "Emerald Ranch."

Limpy Balstrop has turned his place exclusively into a stock-ranch for the breeding of saddle-horses, and is computed to be worth near a million of dollars. His wife spends money as freely as she pleases, which is not much, for the couple grow richer every year.

And now that we have brought our men and women to the safe harbor of matrimony, and set them on the way to increasing the population of Texas, there is nothing more to say to the reader save that word which always comes with a good grace from an author:

"Farewell."

THE END.

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